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THE WORLD

Translated by ISIDOR SCHNEIDER
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Autobiography of

XIM GORKY



IN THE WORLD



Translated by

ISIDOR SCHNEIDER



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Translator's Preface

OF ALL THE RUSSIAN MASTERS GORKY HAS FARED POOREST AT the hands of his translators. The early Russian writers were translated, in most cases, by people who had at least a scholarly interest in their task and, for whom, often, it was a labor of love. In any case it had the virtue of conscientious care even where it exhibited meager literary endowments. By the time Gorky appeared, however, Russian 19th century literature was established in the great place it has held ever since and Gorky became immediately a figure of world interest. Publication of his work was hurried through the presses. The rush, unfortunately, showed itself in most of the translations.

This was so with what is generally considered the greatest of his works, the autobiographical trilogy *My Childhood*,* *In the World* and *My Universities** (first translated as *My University Days*). As it reached its English reading public, it had only a dim resemblance to the original. In the case of one of the volumes, chapters were interchanged and sections dropped out of others. For this reason I was delighted when the project of a one volume edition in a new translation was broached.

In my rendering I have preferred to be free rather than meticulously "correct" where correctness might involve stiff "translation English." Gorky is outstandingly fluid and colloquial and such "correctness" would in itself be a mistranslation. I have also sought to mitigate unnecessary strangeness in the Russian names by using English equivalents, wherever possible, even at the sacrifice of the "quaintness" that some readers profess to enjoy. The names, of course, have no "quaintness" in the original. Generally I have dropped diminutives where they might stand in the way of the reader's immediate identification of the character as, for the same reason, I have dropped the middle patronymic. The usage is essential in Russian social intercourse but is an anomaly in English, and on test, has proved confusing to the reader. I have felt that any new step that would make so great a work more accessible to English-speaking readers was worth taking.

ISIDOR SCHNEIDER

* These are published in two separate books in the same Jaico Series.

IN THE WORLD

Chapter One

IT WAS AS A DOOR BOY IN A SMART, MAIN-STREET SHOE STORE that I went out into the world. The boss was a tubby little man with a coarse, brownish face, greenish teeth, and moist, slime-colored eyes. I thought he was blind, and, as a test, I made a face, at which he said with a rather gentle severity, "Stop twitching!" I was irked at the thought of those dead eyes watching me. Wasn't it more likely he had guessed I was making faces?

"I told you to stop twitching!" he repeated, barely moving his grubby lips. "Stop scratching," his dry whisper stole, as it seemed, upon me. "You're working in a first-class store, just bear that in mind. The door boy must stand straight as a statue."

I didn't know the meaning of the word "statue," and as for stopping scratching, how could I when my hands were dotted with the bites of vermin.

"What did you do for a living before?" asked my boss, after a look at my hands. When I told him he wagged his round head, covered with closely cropped gray hair, and exclaimed in a shocked tone, "Ragpicking! Why, that's even worse than begging or stealing!"

With a touch of pride, I informed him I had stolen, too.

At this, gripping the edge of his desk, he looked like a cat with its paws up, and with an apprehensive glance, he barely breathed, "What? You stole? How?"

When I explained he said, "Oh, that. I consider that only a prank. But if you steal any shoes or money here, I'll have you locked up in jail for life."

He said this with a frightening composure that ended any liking I had for him.

In addition to the boss, the store staff included my cousin, Uncle Jake's Sascha, and the efficient, wheedling, red-faced

head clerk. Sascha, decked out in long trousers, a brown frock coat, a dickey and a tie, snubbed me. After grandpa had brought me in to the boss, he had asked Sascha to give me help and advice. Sascha, with a big-shot scowl, had stipulated, "But he'll have to do as I say!"

Grandpa put his arm on my neck in such a way as to force me to bow. "You're to do as he says; he's older than you and has more experience."

Sascha nodded and said to me, "Remember what grandpa said," and at once began exploiting his seniority.

"Stop looking so goggle-eyed, Kashirin," the boss would tell him.

"I-I'm looking right," Sascha would mumble, lowering his head.

"Ready to butt somebody? Want the customers to think you're a goat?"

The head clerk smiled obsequiously, the boss' mouth gaped to a repulsive grin, and Sascha, red-faced, took refuge behind the counter. I did not enjoy this repartee. And so many of their expressions were new; they might have been talking in a foreign tongue.

When a lady entered, the boss' hands would pop out of his pockets to give his moustache a pull; his face would compose into a sugary smile that gave his cheeks a new crease, but could not liven up the expression of his drab eyes. The head clerk would stand erect, with his elbows pivoted upon his ribs, and the wrists politely dangling. Sascha would blink diffidently, as if trying to cover his bulging eyes; and I, from my post at the door, would scratch surreptitiously and watch the rituals of salesmanship.

On his knees at the customer's feet, the head clerk would try shoes on with remarkably agile fingers. His touch on the woman's foot was tremulously light, as if he were fearful of damaging her solid enough leg which looked like an upturned bottle with a tapering neck.

Once a lady jerked her foot back, screeching, "You're tickling me!"

"Ah—but you have such sensitive skin," the head clerk hurriedly and flatteringingly explained.

It was a joke to see him fawning on customers, and I had to turn away and stare through the glass door panels to hold in my laughter. But curiosity drew me back to follow the salesman through his fascinating maneuvers. Watching him, I thought I'd never achieve such a delicacy of touch, I'd never be so deft fitting shoes on the feet of others.

Frequently the boss would retire to a back room, calling Sascha in with him, and leaving the salesman alone with the customer. Once, fitting a red-headed woman, and toying over her foot, he suddenly took it up in his hand and kissed it.

"My, you're fresh," exclaimed the woman.

And he panted and sighed a prolonged, "O-o-oh!"

And this so convulsed me with laughter that, to stay on my feet, I grabbed the door knob, which turned open, propelling my head through a glass door panel. The head clerk stamped his foot at me, the boss rapped me on the head with a heavily ringed knuckle, and Sascha made a lunge for my ear. On our way home that night, he scolded me, "You'll get fired for things like that. What's there to laugh at, I want to know?" And he went on to explain, "It's good business to have ladies take a shine to the salesman. She mightn't need a new pair of shoes, but she might come in, anyway, just to have a look at him. But you—you're too thick-headed. We put ourselves out for you, and you——"

This made me angry. Nobody was putting himself out for me, certainly not Sascha.

Mornings I had to act as the cook's slavey. She was an unhealthy, unpleasant woman. At her orders I shined the shoes and brushed the clothes of the boss, the head clerk, and Sascha, started the samovar, hauled in firewood, and mopped up in the kitchen. My store chores included sweeping, bringing in tea, making deliveries to customers; then back to the kitchen to bring in meals, at which time Sascha tended door for me, a job he felt beneath him, so that he fumed at me, "Hurry up, slow-poke; making me do your work!"

It was a tedious, fatiguing existence for me, who had become used to the freedom of the sandy Kunavin streets and the banks of the slow Oka, or roaming the fields and woods all day. I had been separated from grandma and my gang. I

had no companionship and life had turned its false and seamy sides to me.

When no sale was made, all three would behave as if the customer had swindled them. The boss would pack away his sugary smile; "Kashirin, put the stuff away," he would order, and he would rage, "Sow of a woman! The idiot got bored idling at home, so she has to come here and turn the store inside out. If you were my wife, you'd get it!"

But his wife, a juiceless creature, black-eyed and big-nosed, just stepped on him, ordering him around like a servant.

Or, after bowing a customer out with syrupy flatteries, they would run her down in a mean and conscienceless manner, till I had an impulse to run out and report it to her. I knew well enough that people generally slander others behind their backs; but these three did it in a peculiarly disgusting way, as if they were the elect chosen to indict all the rest. Tormented by envy, they had nothing good to say about anybody, and dug up scandals about everybody.

Into the store one day came a young lady with shining, rosy cheeks and radiant eyes, dressed in a fur-trimmed velvet cloak, her face emerging from the fur like an exotic flower. She was even more beautiful divested of her cloak, which she handed to Sascha. Her dress of blue-gray silk set off her fine figure, and diamonds glittered on her ears. She brought to mind "Vassillissa, the Beautiful," and I could well have believed her the governor's wife. My three superiors were markedly deferential, bowing to her as if she were a holy lamp, and almost choking as they slavered out compliments. They pranced about like madmen, so that their reflections did St. Vitus dances in the mirror. When she was gone, after having purchased an expensive pair of shoes, the boss whistled and jeered, "The tart!"

"An actress—the low creature," sneered the salesman. And they gabbed about her lovers and her luxuries. That day, when the boss took his siesta in the back room, I pried his gold watch open and squirted vinegar into the mechanism. I felt a happy sense of reward when, on awakening, he came rushing into the shop, holding up his watch, and raving, "What

happened? My watch got all wet. It never happened before. It's all wet; it'll be ruined!"

More than once, in my depression, I thought of doing something to get myself fired.

The snow-covered passersby made no sound; they seemed to be hastening to a funeral, as if, having come late for the procession, they were scurrying to the cemetery by themselves. Horses, plodding through the drifts, shuddered with the strain. From a church belfry back of the store building came melancholy Lenten chimes, which my brain muffled like a pillow.

One day I was in the yard opening a crate of goods that had just been delivered at our back door, when the church watchman, a hunched old man as soft as a bundle of rags and as tattered as if he had just been set upon by a pack of dogs, sidled over to me and whined, "Won't you be so kind as to steal a pair of rubbers for me?"

I made no answer. Taking a seat on the empty crate, he made the sign of the cross over his yawning mouth and reiterated, "How about stealing me a pair?"

"Stealing is a sin," I said.

"Just the same, people steal. Old age must be given some consideration."

He was a pleasing change from the sort I was living among. I knew it was his conviction that I'd steal for him, and I agreed to hand him a pair of rubbers from the window.

"Good," he said matter-of-factly, exhibiting no excitement. "You're not fooling me? No, I see you're not."

After a momentary silence, during which he kept stamping his heels in the slushy snow, and lit up a pipe, he startled me by saying, "But how about if I'm fooling you? How about if I bring the rubbers to your boss and tell him I got them from you for half a ruble? What about that? They cost two rubles and you let me have them for half a ruble. A present, eh?"

I stared at him in stunned astonishment, as if it were already done; but he snuffed on, staring at his shoes, and exhaling bluish smoke. "Suppose your boss had asked me, 'Go test that boy; let's see if he's a thief!' Eh, what?"

"I won't give you the rubbers," I said, scared and angry.

"You've got to. You promised."

He pulled me to him by the arm, his icy forefinger on my forehead, and said, "How can you be thinking 'Here's this,' and 'Here's that.'"

"But you're the one who asked for them."

"I might have asked you anything. I might say, come rob the church! Would you? Think you can trust the whole world? Ah, you little fool!" He nudged me aside and rose. "I don't want any stolen rubbers. I'm no gentleman. I never wear rubbers. I was only fooling. But, because you're so simple-hearted, I'll let you into the belfry, come Easter, to ring the bells and have a look at the town."

"I know how the town looks."

"But it looks much better from the belfry."

Slowly dragging his patched boots through the snow, he turned the corner of the church, I staring after him, cast down and troubled, wondering whether the old man had really been fooling or had really been put up by the boss to test me. I was reluctant to return to the store.

Sascha stormed out into the yard. "What the devil's happened to you?"

With a sudden burst of anger I shook the pliers I had in my hand at him. I knew he and the salesman were stealing. They would stow away a pair of shoes or slippers in the oven flues. On leaving for the night they would tuck them into their over-coat sleeves. They made me nervous, for I had the boss' warning on my mind.

I once asked Sascha, "Do you take anything?"

"Not for myself," he explained, irritably. "I just help the head clerk. 'Do what I tell you,' he says to me, and I have to. If I didn't he'd fix me. The boss understands. He was a clerk himself. You just keep out of it."

When Sascha spoke to me he ogled himself in the mirror, and adjusted his tie with the identical, spread-finger gesture, suitable enough to his splayed hands, used by the head clerk. He was indefatigable in asserting his seniority rights over me, bawling me out and ordering me around in a deep, bass voice, and taking menacing attitudes. I had the advantage in height, but was rather scrawny and gawky, whereas he was compact

and well-padded. In his long trousers and frock coat he looked rather imposing to me, yet there was something offensive and ludicrous in his appearance, as well.

He had a seething hatred of the cook, a puzzling old woman of whom it was hard to say whether she was good or evil. Her fiery black eyes would widen as she exclaimed, "A fight, that's what I enjoy more than anything—any sort, a cock-fight, a dog fight, or between men—it's all one to me." And if she heard cocks or pigeons battling in the yard she would drop what she was doing and, mute and immobile at the window, watch till the battle was over. In the evening she would bait Sascha and me, "Why do you kids sit here, doing nothing. How about a fight?"

This always infuriated Sascha. "I'm no kid, you idiot. I'm the junior clerk."

"Means nothing. Till you're married you're a kid."

"Idiot! Dope!"

"The devil's smart but God hasn't any use for him."

Sascha couldn't stand her chatter; he did his best to wound her with his sallies, at which, scornfully looking him up and down, she said, "Ehh, you cockroach! God slipped when He made you!"

Now and then Sascha would try to get me to smear shoe-black or soot over her face when she napped, put pins in her pillow, or some other trick. But she scared me. In addition, she was a light sleeper, getting up many times during the night. Then she would light a lamp and stare at something in a corner. Sometimes she came to my bed behind the oven, stirred me out of sleep, whispering huskily, "I'm restless. I'm not feeling right. Talk to me."

Drowsily I would spin some yarn, while she rocked herself and didn't say a word. Her body seemed to give off waves of heat and odors of wax and incense, and I expected her to die at any moment—pitch down on her face and die. And then fright would make me raise my voice and she'd halt me, "Hush, you'll wake everybody up and they'll think we're having an affair."

When she sat beside me she always took the same position, hunched-over, her hands between her knees and pressed to her

skinny shanks. She was flat-chested, and right through the heavy linen of her nightgown, her ribs could be seen in outline, like the staves of a broken barrel. She would conclude her lengthy silences with, "And if I die, so what? Happens to everybody?" or, addressing some invisible auditor, "So what, I've lived, haven't I?" or she would cut me short with the command, "Sleep!" and, getting up, would shuffle soundlessly through the dark room.

Sascha would call her "witch!" but behind her back.

I challenged him. "Why don't you say it to her face?"

"Think I'm scared?" But he would follow that, frowning, with, "No, I wouldn't say it to her face. She *could* be a witch!"

With impartial scorn she was inconsiderate of everybody; she certainly never indulged me, dragging me out of bed at six, yelling, "Mean to sleep all day? Get the wood in; start the samovar; polish the brass sign on the door."

His sleep broken by her bawling, Sascha would complain, "What's the row about? I'll tell the boss nobody gets any sleep on account of you!"

With agile motions of her emaciated body, she would turn her smoldering insomniac eyes upon him, "Oh, it's God's mistake talking! What you'd get if you were a son of mine!"

Sascha would curse her, and on our way into the store he would propose, "Something's got to be done to get her fired. How about putting salt in all the pots, when her back's turned? If everything's oversalted, they'll fire her. Or kerosene. What are you staring at?"

"How about doing it yourself?"

"Coward!" he snorted.

The cook died right before our eyes. Leaning over for the samovar she fell down without a sound, as if she had been punched on the chest. On the floor she just turned over once, and blood oozed from her mouth. Sascha and I knew at once she was dead but, numb with fear, we just stared at her awhile, too stunned to move. Finally Sascha bolted out of the kitchen and I, not knowing what to do, stood at the window. The boss waddled in, squatted beside her and prodded her face.

"She's dead," he said. "No doubt of it. Wonder what from?"

He went to the corner where a small icon hung, and crossed himself. After his prayer he ordered Sascha, "Kashirin, run out and call the police."

The police arrived, stamped through the place, took their tips and departed, to come back a little later with a wagon and its driver. Lifting the cook by the head and the legs, they carried her out. Watching them in the doorway, the boss' wife said to me, "Mop the floor."

The boss' comment was, "It's good she died at night." Why that was good I didn't understand.

Going to bed, Sascha, in a gentler tone than usual, said, "Don't put the lamp out."

"Scared?"

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He pulled the blanket all the way over his head, and lay quiet for some time. The night was very still, as if watching for something. The next moment, it seemed to me, a bell clanged, there was a general alarm, and the whole town was out, shouting and jostling. Sticking his nose out of the blanket, Sascha wheedled, "Let's lie on the oven, together."

"It's too hot."

After a brief silence, "But didn't she pop off suddenly? She must have been a witch. I can't sleep."

"I can't, either."

He began telling stories about the dead, about corpses leaving their graves and staying out till midnight, hunting for the places where they had lived and for their kin. "All the dead remember is the town, not the houses and streets."

The stillness deepened and so did the darkness. Half-rising, Sascha asked me, "Want to see what I got in my trunk?"

What he had stored away in that small chest had long piqued my curiosity. He kept the box padlocked, and on opening it he looked around guardedly, and any attempt I made to peep was rebuffed with, "Hey, what are *you* after?"

When I said "yes," he sat up, keeping his feet in bed, and ordered me, quite imperiously, to bring the trunk over and set it at his feet. He kept the key around his neck together with his baptismal cross. Glancing around the dark kitchen, with a self-important look, he unlocked the trunk, blew on the lid as if to cool it, and after a dramatic pause, lifted out a cover-

ing layer of linen shirts. Underneath were cardboard boxes, colored tea wrappers, and old shoe polish and sardine cans.

"What's in them?"

"You'll see."

He put the trunk between his legs, and, bending down, hummed, "*Tsar nebesniu—*" (heavenly Tsar).

What I expected to see was playthings. I had never owned any and affected scorn of them, but had always rather envied those who had them. It made me feel good to think that such a solemn personage as Sascha kept some, though he was shamefaced about them.

Opening a box, he took out the empty frame of a pair of eyeglasses, put them on his nose, and said with great gravity, "It don't matter that the glasses are out. This is a special sort."

"Let me try them on."

"They wouldn't fit you. Your eyes are light and these are for dark eyes." Then he mimicked the boss' wife nagging, but stopped himself short and gave a frightened look around the kitchen.

In an old shoe polish can he kept a collection of buttons, of which he boasted, "I picked them all up myself, in the street. I got thirty-seven here."

In a third box were a big brass pin, also picked up in the street, old nails, shoe buckles, metal doorknobs, bone cane-heads, girls' castoff combs, a copy of *The Dream Book and Oracle*, and a quantity of other objects of the same character.

In my ragpicking I could have accumulated a tenfold heap of such junk in a month. Those treasures of Sascha's were not only disillusioning; they moved me to embarrassing pity toward him. But Sascha looked at each with pride, fondly stroked it, his thick lips pursed out. His bulging eyes regarded them with a loving care, which, through his glassless spectacles, gave his childish face a ludicrous look.

Through these spectacles he now gave me a gracious glance, asking, "How would you like something here for a present?"

"I don't want anything."

I could see that this rejection offended him; his treasure trove had been scorned. After a moment's silence he calmly

ordered me to "Get a towel and go over them. They're covered with dust."

When his treasures had all been wiped and stored away, he turned toward the wall. There was a pouring rain; we heard it drain from the roof, and the wind lashing it against the windows. With his face still averted, Sascha said, "You just wait. Soon as it's dry in the garden I'll show you something that'll make your eyes pop out."

I was dozing off and made no reply. In a few seconds he was at it again, scratching at the walls and saying feverishly, "I'm scared. God, how I'm scared! God Almighty, what's this?"

I felt a paralyzing terror. It seemed to me there stood the cook at the window, her back turned, her brow against the pane, just as she had done in life, taking in a cock-fight. Sascha moaned and kept clawing the wall. With a great effort, as if I were treading live coals, and not daring to look back, I made my way to him and lay down at his side. Exhausted, we finally got some sleep.

Several days later there was a holiday and the store closed at noon. After the midday meal, the boss dozed off and Sascha whispered to me, "Come on."

I supposed that I was to be shown the thing that would make my eyes pop out. He led me into the garden. On a strip between two buildings stood a row of lime trees, their thick trunks stained with moss, their black boughs protruding, stripped and lifeless, and not even a crow's nest in the branches. They affected me like gravestones. These trees were all that grew in the garden—no hedge, no grass. The path was black and trampled to an iron hardness; and the spaces beside it, that were clear of the mat of last year's leaves, were stamped flat and looked like stagnant pools.

Sascha took me to a corner where we were covered from the street by the fence; there he stood under one of the trees, rolled his eyes, and took cautious looks up at the grimy windows of the house next door. Squatting down, he lifted off a heap of leaves, uncovering a massive root, beside which were two bricks buried in the soil. Pulling these out I saw a strip of

roofing tin, and beneath that a board which, lifted out, disclosed a tunnel under the root.

Sascha lit a candle end, and holding it to me, said, "Take a look down, only don't get scared."

He looked thoroughly scared himself. The candle end shook in his fingers; he had become pale; his lips sagged, his eyes dampened, and he hid his free hand behind his back. His fright was contagious, and it was with trepidation that I looked down into the tunnel under the root. It had been hollowed out like a vault, in the rear of which he had lit three little church candles, which threw a bluish light. Though it had no greater depth than a coal scuttle, it was much broader. Its sides were covered with bits of glass and pot shards. On a rag of red cloth, draped over a little mound in the center, was a tiny coffin decorated with strips of tin foil and half-covered with a scrap of cloth, which might have been ripped from a brocaded shroud. Under this protruded a tiny gray claw and the beak of a sparrow. Behind the coffin was a pulpit, on which reposed a brass cross and around it the three candles, in holders, made out of gilt and silvered paper taken from candy boxes.

The slender candle flames dipped outward. The little crypt was dimly dappled with spots of outer light, and tinted gleams within. From it exuded the mingled odors of wax, damp earth, and warm rot; it seemed to slap my face and it irritated my eyes, on which it impinged like a jagged, broken rainbow. Astonishment overcame my fright.

"Nice, eh?"

"What's it for?"

"It's a chapel. Isn't it just like a chapel?"

I shrugged.

"And the sparrow's a corpse," he continued; "they might use his relics because it was for no fault of his that he died."

"Was he dead when you found him?"

"No. He lost himself in the shed and I smothered him in my cap."

"What for?"

"Because I wanted to."

He looked me in the face and again asked, "Nice, isn't it?"

"No."

He bent down, laid the board across the tunnel, forced the bricks back, stood up, brushed himself, and asked me haughtily, "Why don't you like it?"

"I'm sorry about the sparrow."

With eyes that showed no motion, as if he were blind, he stared at me, and gave me a push with his hand on my chest, "Dope! You only say you don't like it because you're jealous. Maybe you think that thing you built in the garden on Kanatnoi Street was better."

Recalling my summer shed there, I said with assurance, "Of course it was better."

Sascha tore off his coat and tossed it on the ground, rolled up his sleeves, spat on his hands, and challenged me, "Is that so? Well, that means a fight!"

I had no desire to fight. The low state of my feelings had drained my combativeness. My cousin's wrathful face alarmed me. With a rush, he butted me on the chest and knocked me over. Straddling me, he shouted, "Shall we fight to the death?"

But I was the stronger and, by now, roused to wrath. In a minute or so it was he who was stretched out on the ground, his face in the dirt, his hands clasped around his head and a gurgle in his throat. Frightened, I wanted to help him, but he punched and kicked me off. Still more worried, I stood apart wondering what to do. He looked up and said, "You know what you got yourself into? When the boss and his missus aren't looking, I'll fix things so I'll have to complain about you and you'll get fired!"

On and on went his abuse and threats until, in a fury, I ran over to his cave, demolished it, and flung the coffin and its sparrow cadaver out into the street. I gutted his "chapel" and trampled everything down.

My frenzy had a strange effect on Sascha. Sitting on the ground, his eyebrows knit together, his hand to his mouth, he looked on in silence. When I was through he rose, without showing any agitation, fixed his clothes, put on his coat, and then said to me with ominous composure, "Now, you'll see! Just wait! I had all this planned out. Witchcraft. You're under a spell. Ha, ha!"

I dropped down as if the words were physical blows. I went cold inside. He did not even give me a backward glance, as he went off, and this heightened his menacing calm. I resolved to run away tomorrow, from the boss, from Sascha and his witchcraft, from this wasted, mindless existence.

Next morning the new cook, when she came to wake me, said, "Goodness, what have you done to your face?"

The witchcraft's beginning, I thought, and my heart sank. But her laughter was so hearty I had to smile, too, and I looked in the mirror. My face had a coat of soot.

"Did Sascha do it?" I asked.

"It might have been me," said the cook, laughing.

In the first shoe I took up in my shoe shining that morning, I ran a pin, which had been stuck in the lining, into my finger. "So this is his witchcraft!" He had fixed all the shoes that way, and so cleverly, that no matter how careful I was, I couldn't escape sticking myself. I got a bowl of icy water, and it gave me great joy to pour it over the wizard's head where he lay, still asleep or feigning sleep.

Nevertheless, I felt low. That coffin kept turning up in my mind, and that sparrow with its crooked, gray claws and its pale beak, outthrust so pathetically, those tinted beams vainly striving to fuse into a rainbow. My fancy magnified the coffin, and reanimated those claws until they reached out, tremulous and alive.

I decided to run away that same evening; but, just before dinner, warming up some food on a primus, I was negligent and it caught fire. Trying to put it out, I spilled burning oil over my hands, and had to be taken to the hospital. I remember that hospital nightmare. In what I recall as a grayish-yellow wilderness, there were herded together, muttering and moaning, gray figures in white robes like shrouds, while a giant on crutches, with eyebrows thick as whiskers, yanked at his black beard and bellowed, "I'll report this to His Eminence."

The cots made me think of the coffin, and the patients, with their noses conspicuously up, of dead sparrows. The yellow walls swayed, the ceiling bellied out like a sail, the floor rose

and ebbed like waves under me. Everything about the place bespoke misery and despair, and tree branches tapped on the windows like hands with sticks.

In the doorway jigged a gaunt, red-headed corpse gibbering as he pulled his shroud over him with his emaciated hands. "Keep me away from madmen!" And the giant on crutches roared in his ear, "I'll report this to His Eminence!"

I had heard from grandpa, grandma and others that in hospitals people died of hunger, so I thought it was all up with me. A woman wearing glasses, and dressed in the shroudlike, white smock, came over to me and chalked something on a slate hanging from the headboard of the cot. The chalk broke and fell on me.

"Your name?"

"I haven't any."

"You must have."

"No."

"Stop fooling, or you'll get a whipping."

I felt that I could be sure of a whipping, and for that reason, I defied her. She hissed at me like a cat, and glided out, noiselessly, like a cat, too.

They lit two lamps, whose yellow globes swung from the ceiling like two eyes, winking and dazed, and swaying as if trying to come together.

In a corner someone mourned, "How can I play without my hand?"

"That's so. They've amputated your hand."

My conclusion was they cut off a man's hand for gambling! What would be done to me before I starved to death?

My burnt hands ached as if the bones were being torn out. I wept with the fright and the pain. I tried to squeeze back the tears by shutting my eyes, but they welled out through the lids and trickled down my temples into my ears.

Night came and everybody burrowed into their cots, secreting themselves beneath gray blankets. The silence deepened every moment. There was just the sound of someone mumbling, "What's the use. He and she, the both of them, are crooks."

I would have written to grandma asking her to come and abduct me from the hospital before they could kill me, but I couldn't use my hands. I pondered ways to escape.

The night silence grew more intense, as if it were the silence of eternity. Quietly slipping off the cot, I went to the double doors, one of which was ajar. In the hall, under a lamp, on a bench with a back, I saw a grizzled head wreathed in smoke, peering at me with hollow, dark eyes. I had no time to hide. "Who's that roaming about? Come here!"

But the voice was gentle, not severe. I went up to him. I saw a round face fringed with stiff hair. On the top of the head the hair was long, sprouted in all directions, and looked like a silver halo. From his belt hung a ring of keys. Had his beard and hair been fuller, he would have resembled Peter the Apostle.

"You're the one with the burned hands? Well, why are you traipsing about at night? Who gave you permission?"

He puffed smoke into my face, put a warm arm round my neck, and pulled me toward him. "Scared?"

"Yes."

"Everybody who comes here is scared, at first; but it's nothing. And of all people you've got no cause to be scared of me. I never hurt a soul. Care for a smoke? Don't, then. You've time yet; another year or so. Where's your parents? None? Well, they're not necessary; you'll get along without them. Just don't let anything scare you."

Not for a long time had I met with anyone whose words were so direct and kind and understandable, so that listening to him was an indescribable relief. When he led me back to my cot, I asked him to sit beside me, and he consented.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I'm a soldier—a real one, a Cossack. And I've been in wars—you bet! That's what soldiers live for. I've fought against the Hungarians, and the Poles, and the Circassians, all you can think of. It's a great calling, war is."

I shut my eyes for a minute, and on opening them, instead of the soldier, there sat grandma in a dark dress, and he was standing beside her, she saying, "They're all dead? Oh, dear!"

The sun was frisking in the room, now plating everything

with his gold, now going in hiding, now returning in lavish radiance, like a playing child.

Grandma bent over me and asked, "What did they do to you, darling? Mutilate you? I told off that old red devil!"

"I'll see to everything," said the veteran, leaving. Grandma, wiping her tears, said, "It appears our soldier hails from my home town."

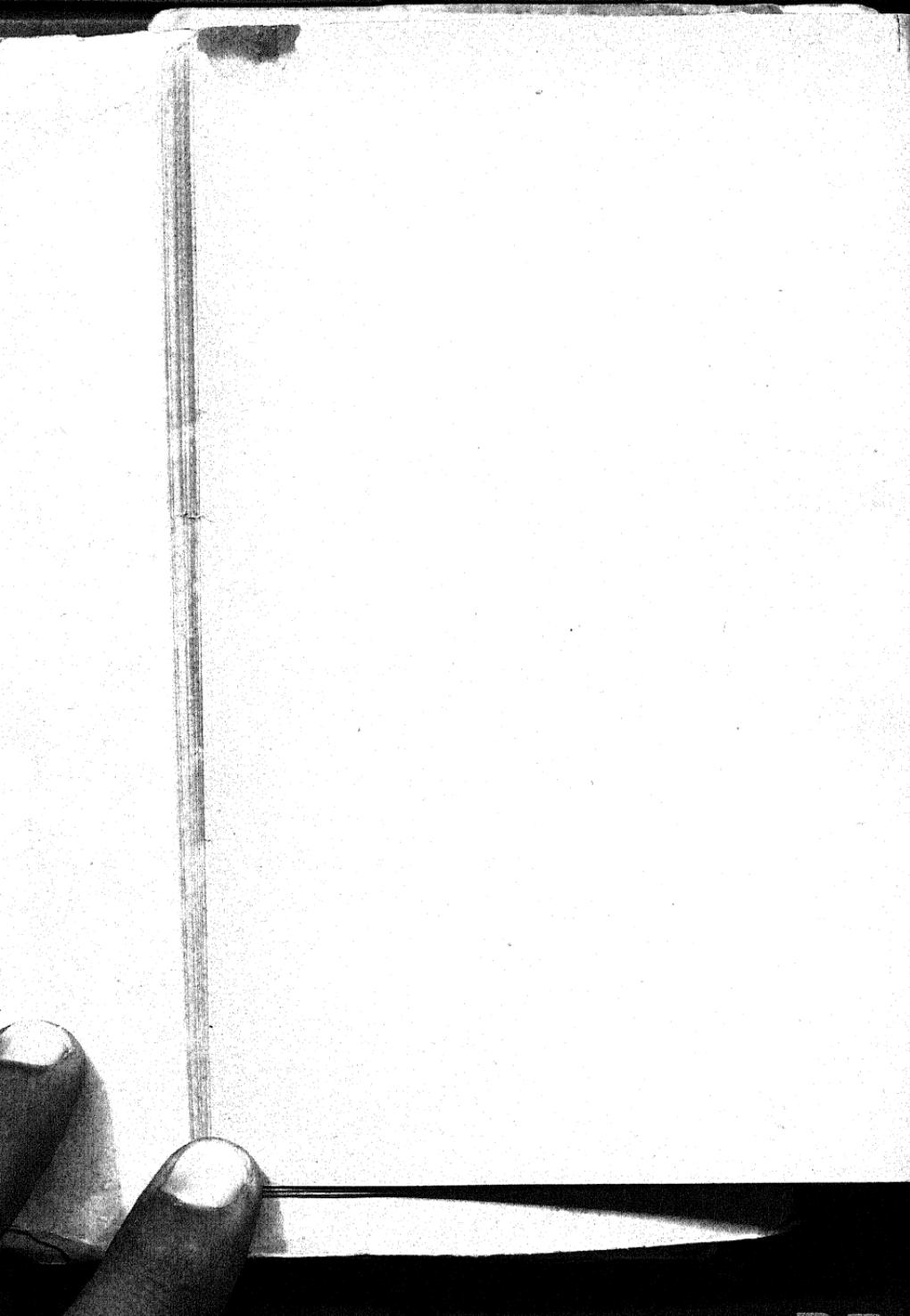
Still thinking I must be dreaming, I said nothing. The doctor came, bandaged me, and behold! there I was with grandma in a carriage, driving through town. She said, "Oh, that grandpa of yours, he's losing his wits; he's sickening, he's got so miserly. A little while ago he made off with a hundred rubles from the office of his new friend, the furrier, Khlist. What a row there was!"

The sun was bright; the clouds soared like white birds. We crossed the bridge over the Volga. The breaking ice creaked underneath and between the bridge planks we could see patches of clear water; and over the distant cathedral's red dome gleamed the golden cross.

We passed a broad-cheeked woman with an armful of willow branches. Spring was approaching; soon it would be Easter. "How I love you, grandma!"

This did not startle her. She answered matter-of-factly, "That's because we're related. But—and I'm not bragging—others love me, too, and for that my thanks to Thee, O Blessed Lady." And, with a smile, she went on, "She'll be rejoicing soon. Her son will rise up. O, Barbara, my daughter!"

And that plunged her into silence.



Chapter Two

WHEN I ARRIVED, GRANDPA WAS ON HIS KNEES IN THE YARD, shaping a wedge with an axe; and his greeting to me was a gesture of aiming it at my head; then, doffing his cap in mockery, he said, "And how does your Holiness? Eh, your Highness? Your term of service is over? Well, now you can live as you please, eh? Ekh—you!"

"We know all about that, everything!" said grandma, waving him off. In her room, getting the samovar started, she told me, "Grandpa is practically ruined. What money he had he lent at high interest to his godson, Nicholas, but without papers. I don't know just how the matter stands; but he's practically ruined; the money's gone. And that's his punishment for not helping the poor or taking pity on the unfortunate. God said to Himself, 'Why bless the Kashirins?' And so He's stripped everything from us."

With a glance around the room she resumed, "I've been trying to persuade God to relent a little, not to be so hard on the old man; and I've been giving a little charity, on the quiet, at night, out of what I earn. You can come with me if you like; I've got a bit of money for tonight."

Grandpa came in, blinked and asked, "Going to have a snack?"

"It's not yours," said grandma, "but you can join in, if you want to; there's enough."

He sat down at the table and said, "Come on, pour the tea."

Everything in the room was in its accustomed place. Only there was the sad emptiness in mama's corner; and on the wall above grandpa's bed was pinned a sheet with the inscription in big letters, "Jesus, Life of the World. May Thy Holy Name accompany me every day and hour of my existence."

"Who lettered that?"

Grandpa offered no answer, but grandma, after a pause, said, smiling, "That piece of paper cost—a hundred rubles!"

"None of your business!" shouted grandpa. "I give to others."

"No harm in giving now, but there was a time when you didn't," said grandma, quietly.

"Shut up!" he shrieked. Which brought old times right back again.

In a basket, on a box in the corner, Nicky woke up, his faded blue eyes barely visible. He looked sallower and more frail and anemic than before. Failing to recognize me, he silently turned away and shut his eyes.

News from the street was somber. Vyakhir had died—had drawn his last breath before Easter week. Khabi had moved. Yaz' feet had been amputated—he would never walk again. Giving me this news, dark-eyed Kostrom said bitterly, "Boys die early."

"It's only Vyakhir who died."

"It's all the same. Leaving the street is like dying. As soon as we make friends and are getting along, the boys have to go to work in town or they die. There are new tenants in your old place at Chesnokov's. The name's Evsienko. They have a boy, Niushka, who doesn't amount to much. He's got a couple of sisters; one's too small; and the other's a cripple, uses crutches, but she's beautiful." After a pause, he added, "Churka and I are in love with her, both of us, and we fight."

"Fight? With her?"

"No, Churka and I fight. We don't fight with her—not often."

I realized of course that big boys and even men fall in love. I had heard my share of vulgarities on that topic. But the news disconcerted me. I felt sympathetic with Kostrom, but it made me uneasy to look at his gaunt figure and his sullen, dark eyes.

I met the girl cripple that very evening. Going down the stair to the yard she dropped a crutch, and waited, helpless, on the steps, supporting herself on the banister, with small, frail, almost transparent, hands. I did my best to pick up the crutch with my bandaged hands, and was exasperated at not

succeeding. From her position above me she watched me, and laughed in a gentle manner.

"What did you do to your hands?"

"Burned them."

"And I'm lame. Do you live here? Were you in the hospital long? I was there a long, long time," and added, sighing, "such a long time."

She was dressed in white and had on light blue galoshes, worn but clean. Her hair was done in a thick, smooth braid that came down to her breast. Her eyes were large and sober. From their still depths flamed a blue light that illuminated her delicate, sharp-nosed face. Despite her amiable smile, I didn't take to her. "Hands off, please!" seemed to be written over her invalid body. What had made my friends infatuated with her?

"I've been crippled for so long now," she said, voluntarily, and almost with pride. "I was bewitched, out of spite, by a neighbor with whom my mother quarreled. Were you scared in the hospital?"

"Yes," and I left her, feeling awkward.

It must have been midnight when grandma very gently roused me out of sleep. "Coming with me? By doing good to others your hands will heal quickly."

Taking my arm, like one who escorts the blind, she led me through the dark streets. It was an overcast, humid night. A steady wind that sped the river current, whipped cold sand over my legs. Warily approaching the lightless windows of the hovels, grandma would twice cross herself, then lay a coin and three hard biscuits on the window sill, and again cross herself. Raising her eyes to the black sky, she mumbled, "O Sainted Queen of Heaven, succor these people. Dear Mother, in Thy sight, sinners are we all!"

The stillness and the shadows deepened the farther we went. Pitch black was the sky, impenetrable, as if stars and moon were gone for good. A dog lunged at us, snarling; I saw the glitter of his eyes in the blackness, and cravenly I sought refuge against grandma. "It's all right," she soothed me. "It's nothing but a dog. It's past the time when the devil is about. The cocks have started crowing."

Calling the dog over, she patted him and rebuked him, "You mustn't scare my grandson, pup."

The dog gave me an ingratiating rub on my legs, and the three of us marched on. Twelve such "secret alms" did grandma leave on windows. The first light appeared, and in it the gray houses emerged from the shadows; the white Napolny church belfry stood up like a sugar loaf; and you could almost see through the graveyard wall.

"This old lady is getting tired," said grandma. "It's time to go home. When the housewives get up they'll see that Our Lady has left something for their little ones. When there's never enough a scrap comes in handy. Oh, Alex, the folks are so poor and nobody cares!" And she sang this verse: "The millionaire forgets God, has no thought of Judgment Day, never thinks of the poor man as friend and brother. He only thinks of heaping up gold that will turn into coals of Hell."

"That's the way it is. But we ought to live for each other instead, the way God lived for all of us. I'm glad to have you back."

I, too, felt serenely happy, realizing dimly that what I had taken part in was something unforgettable. The brown dog at my side shivered; I saw his cold muzzle, and trusting eyes begging to be forgiven.

"Can I take him home?"

"If he'll come with us. Here's a biscuit for him. I have two left. Let's sit down on the bench. How tired I am!"

And we rested on a bench near a gate with the dog at our feet crunching the biscuit; and grandma told me, "There's a Jewish woman living here, has ten young ones, one smaller than the other. 'Daughter of Moses,' I asked her, 'How do you manage?' 'With God's help,' she answered. 'How else?'"

Snuggling against my warm grandma, I fell asleep.

Again the current of my life flowed swift, a stream of impressions bringing me something new each day, filling my soul with elation or unrest or pain, but at least challenging me to think. I, too, was soon resorting to everything to see the crippled girl, to sit with her, chatting or silent at the gate. In her

company silence, too, was pleasant. She was a tidy person, and her voice was like that of a singing bird. Charmingly she would describe the life of the Cossacks on the Don, among whom she had lived with her uncle, an oil refinery worker. Now her locksmith father had settled down in Nizhny. "An uncle of mine works at the Tsar's palace."

On Sundays and holiday evenings all the people on the street came together here at the gate. The youths went to pet in the graveyard; the men flocked to the taverns; and the wives and the children stayed here, sitting on the bench or in the sand.

The children played ball, or bowled, or played other games; the mothers watched, cheering them on or laughing at misplays. It was gay, though deafening. Stimulated by the attention of the grownups, any trifle was sufficient to excite impassioned rivalry. But no game could so absorb Kostrom, Churka and me, but we found an occasion to break off to make a display before the girl cripple.

"Ludmilla, did you see me knock down five pins in that bowling match?" And for reward a nod and a sweet smile.

Formerly our gang always took the same side in games, but now Kostrom and Churka played against each other. They sought to outdo each other in feats of skill or strength, sometimes coming to blows and tears. In one fight they could not be pulled apart, and adults had to pour water over them as over fighting dogs. Ludmilla, on the bench, stamped on the ground with her good foot, and when the antagonists wrestled up to her, prodded them away with her crutch, commanding them in a terrified voice, "Stop that!" Her face was almost blue-white, and her eyes twisted and glittered in a frenzied way, like those of a person possessed.

Another time Kostrom, after losing to Churka in a bowling match, crouched behind an oat bin in a grocery store, and wept. I couldn't bear to see it. The sobs came through clenched teeth; his cheekbones seemed to strain through the skin. His bony face seemed to have turned to stone. Plump tears dropped from his sullen, dark eyes. To my efforts at consolation he replied with fierce threats, as he choked back his tears, "Wait. He'll get a brick on his head. You'll see."

In his conceit, Churka took to walking in the middle of the street like the marriageable youths, hands in pocket, cap at angle. He had learned to spit between his teeth like a sport, and boasted, "Soon I'll be smoking. I tried twice but it made me sick."

I was disturbed by all this. I saw my friends leaving me, and I put the blame on Ludmilla. One evening, in the yard, as I was sifting my pickings of bones, rags, and other scrap, she approached in a swaying walk, and waved at me. "How do you do," she said, with three little ceremonial nods of her head. "Have you seen Kostrom or Churka?"

"Churka isn't pals with us any more. And it's your fault. The two of them have quarreled, because they're in love with you."

She blushed, but made a mocking reply, "And how am I to blame?"

"What do you want to make them fall in love with you for?"

"Do I ask them to?" And as she went off angrily, she said, "Oh, it's so stupid. I'm older than they are. I'm fourteen. Boys don't fall in love with older girls."

"So that's all you know!" I said, intending to hurt her. "How about Khlistov's sister? She's old and the boys run after her, in her store."

Ludmilla turned on me, dug her crutch in the sand, and said in a tearful voice, and with an excited gleam in her lovely eyes, "You don't know so much yourself. That storekeeper is a bad woman,—and me I'm only a little girl. But you ought to read the novel, *Kamchadal'ka*, part two; then you'll be able to talk."

Next day, wishing to make up with Ludmilla, I brought her some barley sugar, which I knew to be her favorite candy. "Like to have some?"

"Go away," she replied angrily. "We're not friends!" Yet she soon accepted it, but with the comment, "You should have wrapped it in some paper. How dirty your hands are!"

"I washed them, but it don't come off."

She took my hand in her dry, hot palm, and looking at it, cried out, "My, but it's rough!"

"Yours is rough, too."

"That's from the needle. I sew a lot." Then, looking around, she proposed, "Let's go where we can be alone and read *Kamchadalka*. How would you like that?"

It took us a while to find a place; nothing seemed suitable; and we ended up in the bathhouse. Though it was dark, it had a window overlooking a littered spot, hemmed in by the shed and the adjoining shop where the small cattle were butchered. Seldom did anybody cast a glance there. Sitting there beside the window, her lame foot on a stool, her good foot on the floor and her face behind the tattered book, she agitatedly declaimed many tiresome or meaningless words. And yet I was enthralled. From the floor I could look up at her eyes, moving like two blue flames across the page. Now and then tears brimmed over, and her voice choked, and the rapid, unfamiliar words ran together unintelligibly. Nevertheless I retained some of the words, sought to fashion them into verses, putting them through all sorts of turns, and succeeded in making what she read completely incomprehensible to me.

My dog, whom I had christened "Wind" because he was long, shaggy, swift, and sounded like the autumn wind in the chimney flues when he howled, would lie on my knees, dozing.

"Listening?" Ludmilla would ask, and I would nod.

Arranging the words in my mind, to give them cadences as in a song, each word taking on its own shining life like a star in the dark—this grew into an obsession.

As the light failed, Ludmilla's white hand would drop across the book and she'd say, "Good, wasn't it?"

These readings in the bathhouse went on even when, to my great satisfaction, Ludmilla stopped reading *Kamchadalka*. It had been a trial being quizzed about the interminable book—there was a third part, following the second, which she had been reading to me, and she said there was a fourth to come. A rainy day suited us best, unless it was a Saturday, when the bath ovens were stoked. When it rained, the yard was soaked; no one ventured out; no one could spy on us.

Ludmilla dreaded our being discovered, as did I. We sat together, hours on end, talking of anything that came to our minds. I told her some of grandma's stories, and from her I

heard of the life of the Cossacks on the Medveditz River.¹

"It was so lovely there," she would say with a sigh. "What is it like here? A land of beggars!"

Then the bathhouse became unnecessary to us. Ludmilla's mother took a job with a furrier and was away from the house all day. Since her sister went to school, and her brother to a tile factory, the house was all ours. On rainy days I went there and helped the girl at her housework. With a laugh she would say, "We're living together just like a married couple, and even better; husbands don't help their wives."

When I got some money I spent it on cookies, which we had with tea; and to keep her nagging mother from finding out that it had been used, we then cooled off the samovar with cold water. Grandma sometimes joined us, bringing her lace orders or other sewing, and spinning her wonderful yarns. On grandpa's excursions into town, Ludmilla visited us, and what care-free banquets we had!" "How well we live!" grandma would say. "With money of our own we can do as we wish."

She abetted my friendship with Ludmilla. "It's good for a boy and girl to be friends—only no tricks!" And, in honest words, we were told what "tricks" were meant. What she told us had the beauty of an inspiration. I was given a full understanding of the mistake of picking the unripened flower and forfeiting, thereby, the fragrance and the fruit.

We were free of any urge toward "tricks," but we did not hesitate to discuss that tabooed subject. It was virtually forced upon us by the gross forms, offensive to us both, in which the sexual relationship was continuously and tediously exhibited.

Ludmilla's handsome father was about forty. His hair and his beard were curly, and he could overpower one with a lift of his eyebrows. A peculiarly taciturn man, I cannot recall hearing a word out of him. When he petted his children, the sounds he made were inarticulate, like those of a mute; and he was silent, even when he beat his wife.

On Sundays and holiday evenings he would appear at the gate in a pale blue blouse, ballooning velvet trousers tucked into polished high boots, with an accordion strapped over his

¹This river is a tributary of the Don.

shoulder; and there he would stand, stiff as a military sentry. And soon there would be something like a military parade across the gate as girls and women would file past, giving Evsienko "the eye," under their lashes, or brazenly direct, while he, with his lower lip pouted out, took appraising glances with his black eyes. This communication through wordless ogling had a repellent, animal-like character. From the languid, tranced movement of the women in this processional, one could imagine that a commanding flick of his eyelid toward a chosen one, would send her fainting to the mucky ground.

"The sot; the showoff!" Ludmilla's mother would mutter. She looked like a worn broom, tall and thin, her face long and sallow and crop-haired from an attack of typhus. Ludmilla, beside her, would chatter away, in vain attempts to divert her attention. But, blinking in her agitation, her mother would exclaim, "Oh, you monster! Stop! Stop!" Her slitlike Mongol eyes had a glittering, rigid look, always focused on something and never moving.

"Mama, don't aggravate yourself. What does it matter?" Ludmilla would say. "Look how fancy the mat-weaver's widow has got herself up!"

"I'd be able to dress up, too, if not for the three of you. You've consumed me," said the mother, staring pitifully through her tears at the squat figure of the mat-weaver's widow. She was like a hut. Her bosom projected like a roof, and her red face, half-covered by her green kerchief, was like a gable window in the sun.

Evsienko, pulling his accordion around front, started it up, playing tune after tune which carried far, bringing children swarming and tumbling with ecstasy in the sand at his feet.

"You wait. I'll give it to you!" his wife threatened. He gave her a disdainful glance, but said nothing. The mat-weaver's widow took a seat on the Khistovs' bench nearby, and gave him rapt attention. Sunset reddened the field back of the graveyard. Like lumps of flesh in their holiday colors, people bobbed through the street, as on a river current. The children were swift as gusts of wind. The air was excitingly warm and caressing. From the sun-heated sand steamed a curious pun-

gency. Most penetrating was the oily, sweetish slaughterhouse odor, the odor of blood, while from the furrier's yard came the acrid smell of curing skins. Chattering women, belowing men, children chiming like little bells, the vibrant bass of the accordion, all merged into one great resonance, a mighty sigh of the ever-laboring earth.

Bare and brutal though it all was, it somehow inspired a faith, embracing and profound, in that harsh and frankly animal life. And above the din unforgettable, feeling words reached straight into the heart. "Each in his turn." "It's unfair to gang together against one." "If we cannot pity ourselves, where will we find pity?" "Did God make woman to be a laughing stock?"

The night began to close in; the air freshened; sounds grew faint. Draped in shadows the cottages seemed higher and broader. Children were carried away to bed, some already asleep under the fence, or in the laps or at the feet of their mothers. The darkness quieted the children and made them docile. Unobserved, Evsienko vanished as if he had melted away. Gone, too, was the mat-weaver's widow. The deep accordion notes reverberated from far off, behind the graveyard. Ludmilla's mother sat on a bench, bowed, her back humped up like a cat's. Grandma was taking tea with the midwife, an enormous, yet flat-chested, woman, whom the street feared as a witch. She had a nose like a duck's bill, and wore a gold "hero" medal on her curveless, mannish bosom. She was said to have carried out of a burning house the invalid wife and three children of a colonel. Grandma and she were friends; they smiled when they saw each other, no matter how far off, as if they were seeing something especially nice.

Ludmilla, Kostrom and I sat on the gate bench. Churka had challenged Ludmilla's brother to a wrestling match. Panting in each other's grip, they were furiously trampling the sand. "Stop it!" cried Ludmilla, anxiously.

With his black eyes in a sidelong gaze upon her, Kostrom told a ghost story about Kalinin, the hunter, a crafty-eyed, grizzled old man, ill-famed throughout the town, who had recently died, but whose body had not been interred in the earth. His black coffin stood on scaffolding, apart from the

other graves. On its lid were painted in white, a cross, a spear, a stick and crossed bones. Every night at dusk, according to the story, the old man left his coffin and hunted for something all over the graveyard and didn't get back till cock-crow.

"Don't talk about such things!" pleaded Ludmilla.

"That's the bunk!" cried Churka, slipping out of his antagonist's hold. "Why do you have to lie? I saw them bury him, myself, in the ground; the one above is only a monument. And that story about the dead man walking, it was that souse of a blacksmith who started it."

Kostrom, not deigning to look at him, said, "Go sleep in the graveyard, and you'll see."

Thus began their usual wrangle. With an unhappy shake of her head, Ludmilla asked, "Mama, do the dead walk at night?"

"Yes," her mother answered, as if recalled by the question from somewhere far off.

A shopkeeper's son, Valek, a tall, plump, rosy-faced youth of twenty, came up, and hearing the dispute said, "I'll give three greven and ten cigarettes to any of you three boys who'll sleep on top of the coffin till morning."

We were stunned to silence by the challenge, and Ludmilla's mother exclaimed, "Such foolishness! What do you want to put children up to such foolishness for?"

"Hand over a ruble, and I'll go," said Churka.

Kostrom immediately taunted him, "Three greven makes you afraid?" He turned to Valek. "Offer him a ruble; he won't go anyway. He's just a blow-hard."

"All right. Here's the ruble."

Churka got up, and without saying a word, slowly, almost hugging the fence, slipped away. Kostrom whistled after him jeeringly, between his fingers. Ludmilla, in a troubled voice, however, said, "Why does he have to brag so?"

"Where are you off to, coward?" sneered Valek. "And that's supposed to be the champion of the street."

I could not bear his sneers. We wasted no affection on this paunchy youth who egged boys on to mischief, told them dirty stories, and incited them to tease girls. For doing what he told them, boys were continually getting into trouble. Something

had made him take a dislike to my dog, whom he used to stone, and to whom one day he gave bread with a needle in it. Still less could I bear to see Churka shrinking away, humiliated.

I told Valek, "Give me the ruble. I'll go."

At once he began making fun of me and doing his best to throw a scare into me. He asked Ludmilla's mother to hold the ruble, but she refused it, and said angrily, "Don't ask me to hold it. None of that!" And went off.

Ludmilla couldn't get herself to hold it, which set Valek off into more jeering. I was about to go off without the money, when grandma came along, and hearing about it, accepted the ruble. To me she said gently, "Wear your overcoat and take along a blanket. It turns chill at dawn."

What she said strengthened my confidence that I could expect nothing awful to happen there.

Valek made the condition that I should remain on the coffin, sitting or lying, all through the night, even if the coffin should heave while old Kalinin was getting out. If I jumped off, I would lose. "Remember," he said, "I'll have my eyes on you."

Grandma kissed me and made the sign of the cross over me as I set off toward the cemetery. "If you see anything, don't stir; just repeat 'Hail Mary.'"

I hurried on, eager to have the thing started and done with. Kostrom and another boy went with me as escorts. Climbing over the brick wall, I got tangled in the blanket and had a fall, but was up immediately as if the earth had pushed me off. I heard a low laugh, and my heart clenched and a shudder ran down my spine.

I stumbled on to the black coffin, against which sand had shored up on one side, though on the other, the stumpy posts on which it was supported were visible. It was as if someone had tried to raise it, only to let it fall askew. Sitting on the edge of the coffin, I looked around me. The hilly space was just heaped with crosses, and shadows trembled over the graves. Among the graves stood slender willows, their boughs uniting buried neighbors with their shade. Through their shadow tracery stiff grass blades rose.

The white church loomed up like a snowdrift, and the small, setting moon shone through the still clouds. I heard Yaz' "fool-of-a-peasant" father languidly ringing the bell in his hut. With each pull at the cord its tortured little creak could be heard, to be followed by the clang of the little clapper, a sharp, unhappy sound. I could almost hear him say, "God rest us. Ai!", and the memory was somehow smothering and hard to bear. Despite the night coolness I sweated profusely. Should I get into Yaz' hut in time if old Kalinin actually got out?

I knew the layout of the cemetery, having often chased among the graves with Yaz and other playmates. Mama's grave was near the church.

People were still up in the village, for snatches of their laughter and verses of songs drifted over to me. Perhaps from the railroad tracks to which sand was being carted, or from the adjoining village of Katizovka, there came the muffled strains of an accordion. And, as usual, Miachov, the drunken blacksmith, was staggering and singing. I recognized his song:

"Mama's one little sin is she loves nobody but papa."

It was pleasant to hear the day sigh itself out; but with each peal of the bell the silence deepened; it was like a river flooding a meadow, drowning and covering everything. The soul seemed to be floating up into the infinite, to go out like a match in the dark, absorbed in that sea of space where live only the bright, unattainable stars, while all on earth crumbles away, worthless and dead.

Wrapped in my blanket with my feet tucked under, I faced the church. With every movement I made the coffin creaked, and a gritty sound came from the sand beneath. Twice something fell close to me, and a lump of brick followed. A thrill of fear passed through me; but I realized that it must be Valek and his pals on the other side of the wall, trying to scare me. On the contrary, the presence of living beings bolstered my confidence.

Without wishing to, I began thinking about mama. Catching me with a cigarette once, she wanted to beat me, but I said, "Don't touch me; I'm suffering enough, I feel sick." And later,

having been sent behind the stove for punishment, she had complained to grandma, "He is without feelings; he has no love for anybody."

I had been hurt by that. I felt sorry for mama when she beat me, because she seldom had cause. Altogether I had borne a heavy load of maltreatment. Now there were those on the other side of the wall, knowing I was terrified lying alone in the graveyard, yet doing their best to intensify my terrors.

I had an impulse to shout, "Go to the devil, you!" to them, but that was perilous. Who could tell what the devil, who might be around, would do about that? The mica in the sand glimmered in the moonlight, and I recalled how, lying on a raft, once, on the Oka, face down to the water, a sunfish almost grazed my face, then turned on its side, curved like a human cheek, glanced at me with its round, bird eyes, and dove down with a fluttering motion, like a falling maple leaf. And memory kept toiling for me, recollecting episode after episode, as if straining to fend off the fantasies born of fear.

A hedgehog bowled along, scraping the sand with its hard paws. It made me think of a hearth spirit; it was as tiny and tattered. And I remembered grandma, squatting before the oven, invoking the hearth spirit, "Good master of the house, rid us of the cockroaches."

Far away, beyond the town, too distant to see where, it began to grow light. The cold dawn wind ruffled my cheeks and my eyes. I snuggled in my blanket. I didn't care what came now.

Grandma woke me. Standing beside me, tugging at the blanket, she said, "Up now. Are you cold? Were you scared, eh?"

"I was. But don't let anybody know. Don't tell the boys."

"Why not?" she asked, astonished. "If you weren't scared, you'd have nothing to be proud of."

On our way home she said to me, "On this earth, darling, you have to learn from your own experiences. If you can't learn from yourself, you can't learn from anybody."

By nightfall I was the street hero. I was asked, "Could it be that you weren't scared?" When I replied, "Yes, I was scared," they wagged their heads and said, "You see!"

A shopkeeper buttonholed everybody to vociferate, "So that might only be nonsense about Kalinin walking about. And if he did walk would that boy have been scared? No, sir. He would have chased Kalinin out of the graveyard; and that would have been the last of him!"

From Ludmilla I got glances of tender admiration. Even grandpa showed his pleasure. Everybody made much of me, except Churka, who sneered, "That was nothing for him; his grandmother's a witch!"

having been sent behind the stove for punishment, she had

Chapter Three

LIKE A STAR GROWING FAINT AT DAWN, MY BROTHER NICK faded out. He slept, along with grandma and myself, on a bedding of rags on planks set up in a small shed. A chicken coop was on the other side of the wall, through whose chinks we could hear the fattened hens squawking and flapping during the night, and in the morning the brassy rooster crowing his alarm. "I could tear you to pieces!" grandma, wakened out of her sleep, would mutter.

I was up already, gazing fascinated at the rays of sunlight streaming through the chinks, and the silvery motes that danced in them. To me the motes were like the words of which a fairy tale was made up.

The planks on which we lay had been gnawed by the mice, and served as a playground for swarms of spotted red beetles.

At times, to get away from the infiltrating stenches of the chicken coop, I stole out of the shed and took a perch on the roof, from which I watched the tenants as they woke up, bloated with sleep and almost eyeless. The shaggy pate of the boatman, Fermanov, a bad-tempered drunk, emerged, and I would see him blink at the sun with gummy, running eyes, and hear his bearish snorts. Next came grandpa, pattering across the yard to the bathhouse for his morning rinse in cold water. There would follow the landlord's talkative cook, a freckled woman with a pointed nose, who resembled a cuckoo, and the landlord himself, who resembled a plump old pigeon. All, in fact, seemed close to the animal world, bird or beast.

Cheerfully bright though the morning might be, I would feel depressed, longing to get away to the unpeopled fields, having learned by this time that the human presence manages to blight a beautiful day.

I was thus sprawled on the roof one day, when grandma called me, and when I stood beside her on the bed, she told me in a low voice, with a sad shake of her head, "Nick is dead."

The child had rolled off his pillow and was curled up, gaunt and blue, on the coverlet. His shirt had hiked up to his neck, baring his little bloated belly and his deformed legs. His hands were curled behind his back in a curious way, as if in an effort to raise himself; and his head was turned sideward.

"Thank God he's gone!" said grandma, as she combed her hair. "What could the unfortunate little creature have lived for?"

Mincing in, on what were almost dance steps, grandpa appeared, and warily touched his fingers to the child's closed eyes. Grandma turned on him. "What's the idea of touching him before your hands are washed!"

"You see!" grandpa mumbled. "It's born, it eats—but all for nothing."

Grandma cut in, "Still talking in your sleep!"

He gave her an absent look. On his way out into the yard, he said, "You can do what you like but I'm not giving him a funeral."

"You cheapskate!"

I left and did not come back till nightfall. Nick was buried the following morning, and while masses were being said, I sat with my dog over mama's reopened grave. Beside me was Yaz' father, who had done the digging at cut rates, and kept reminding me of it. "I only did it for friendship's sake. I would have charged anybody else so many rubles."

The yellow pit exhaled a strong, musty smell. Peering in, I saw damp black boards. No matter how lightly I moved, the sand around the edge cascaded down, leaving little gulleys in the heaped soil. My movements were deliberate. I wanted to cover those boards.

"None of your tricks," said Yaz' father, smoking.

Grandma carried the little coffin to the grave. The "peasant trash" jumped into the pit, set the coffin next to the boards, climbed out, and kicking and shoveling the earth back, he filled the grave, grandpa and grandma silently lending a hand. No priests; no beggars; only we four among the swarming

crosses. As she paid him, grandma reproached him, "You moved Barbara's coffin."

"Couldn't help it. Otherwise I'd have had to dig into somebody else's plot. Don't worry about it."

Grandma knelt on the grave, lamented, and then went off, with grandpa after her, his cap over his eyes and his hands holding his shabby coat together.

"Seed sown in unplowed ground," he said, trotting ahead, like a crow hopping over the furrows during plowing.

"What does he mean?" I asked grandma.

She replied, "He gets ideas, God bless him."

It had grown hot. Grandma plodded, her feet sinking in the warm sand. She stopped often to mop her sweating face.

"The black thing in mama's grave," I asked, "was that her coffin?"

"Yes," she said bitterly. "Stupid dog that he is! Barely a year and Barbara's already decayed. It's this sandy soil; the water goes through. That being the case he should have—"

"Do we all have to decay?"

"All. The only exceptions are the saints."

"Then you won't decay."

She stopped, fixed my cap, and said to me earnestly, "Better not think about it, do you hear?"

But I did. How outrageous and ugly death was! How revolting! It made me feel bad.

By the time we got home grandpa had already heated the samovar and set the table. "Let's have some tea. I expect you're hot. My tea's in there, too. This is for all of us."

He patted grandma on the shoulder. "Well, mother?"

Grandma raised her hands. "What can be the meaning of it all?"

"It means God's offended with us; and he's stripping everything from us, piece by piece. If families lived in harmony, like the fingers of a hand—"

It was long since I'd heard him so gentle and amicable. In the hope that what the old man said might soothe my injured feelings, help me forget the dripping, protruding black boards, I listened to him. But grandma unceremoniously cut him short.

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"None of that, father. You've been handing that out all your life, and I'd like to know, has it done anyone any good? Your whole life you've been eating into people like rust into iron."

Grandpa gave her a look, mumbled something under his breath, but ventured nothing audible.

That evening, talking to Ludmilla at the yard gate, I spoke of that melancholy morning's burial at my mother's grave. She was unimpressed.

"Orphans have advantages. If my father and mother died, I'd let my sister look out for my brother and I'd become a nun. Anyway, that's all there'd be for me to do. A cripple doesn't get married, and she can't work. And I wouldn't want to risk bringing other cripples into the world." She spoke practically, as did all the women on our street, and it was probably that evening that my interest in her began to fade. Besides, the turn my life took after that left me few occasions to see her.

Several days after my brother's death grandpa told me, "Go to bed early today, before dark. We'll be going to the forest for wood."

"I'll come along to pick herbs," said grandma.

There was a pine and birch forest on swampy ground about two miles off. On one side it stretched to the Oka; on the other to the Moscow road. It was full of dead and fallen trees. Nearby, on what was called Savelov Ridge, was a stretch of pine woods, whose bristly, black outline against the horizon looked like a shaggy black tent. Both were properties of Count Shuvalov, but were indifferently guarded, and were regarded by the people of Kunavin as a sort of village common. They trimmed off the dead branches, carted off the fallen trees and, on occasion, did not scruple to fell live trees. In the autumn people slipped into the woods, dozens at a time, with axes in their belts and ropes coiled around their waists, to bring out a supply of winter firewood.

And so it was that, at dawn, we three made our way over the dewy, silvery green meadows. On our left, beyond the Oka, ruddying the sloping Diatlov Hill, lighting up the white walls of Nizhny and its golden church domes, and brightening the garden, rose in its unhurried fashion our indolent Russian sun.

Like a sleepy breath blew the soft wind from the sluggish Oka. Overweighted with dew, the golden buttercups seemed to stagger; little flower bells of a lilac hue bowed humbly to the earth; varicolored straw flowers stood serely on patches of dry sod; and the flower we call "belle of the night" opened its blood-red, starlike petals. Like a sombre army the forest advanced to meet us. The pines looked winged like gigantic birds; the birches looked like girls. The dank swamp odors floated over the fields. Beside me, his pink tongue lolling out, trotted my dog, stopping now and then to sniff and cock his foxlike head questioningly. Grandpa, wearing a jacket of grandma's and an old beret, winking and smiling over some secrets of his own, walked as furtively as if he were stealing something; while grandma, in a blue blouse, a black skirt, and a white kerchief over her head, waddled along serenely. You never need hurry walking behind her.

As we entered the forest grandpa livened up. He had his nose in the air and began to speak, at first brokenly and quite unintelligibly, then gaily and grandly, as if he had had something to drink.

"Forests are God's gardens. How were they planted, if not by His breezes, the sanctified breath of His mouth? In my youth, when I worked on ships, I made a trip to Zhegulia. I tell you, Alex, you'll never have the life I had. There are forests along the Oka, from Kasimov to Murom; and along the Volga they stretch all the way to the Urals. Ah, it's endless and wonderful."

Grandma gave him a sidelong glance and winked at me, while he, stumbling over the uneven ground, told me in dusty, rambling words, a tale that has fixed itself in my memory.

"We were freighting oil drums from Saratov to the Fair at Makara. Cyril of Porekha was our captain, and the mate was a Tatar called by some name like Asaf. At Zhegulia we had the wind head on, and in gale force, and since there was no point in being tossed around, we went ashore to cook a meal. It was May. The water lay all around the land. The waves swam over it like flocks of birds, like the swans that sail on the Caspian by the thousands. In spring the hills around Zhegulia are green, and the sunlight just drowns everything in gold."

"Resting there we became friends, we felt as one. On the river it was raw and gray; but on the banks it was cozy and smelled sweet. When night fell, our captain, Cyril, a tough old man, got up, pulled off his cap and said to us, 'Children, from now on I'll command you and serve you no longer. Get along on your own. I'm taking to the woods!'

"We were stunned. What could he be saying? Somebody had to be in charge. People, as you'll understand, can't get along without somebody to guide them, even on the Volga where it's straight ahead like a road. Even there you can lose your way, because people without a head are like brainless beasts—and no one cares what becomes of the other! So we were alarmed; but that one—his mind was made up. 'I'm tired of being your shepherd,' he said, 'I'm taking to the woods.'

"There were those among us who were ready to hold him back by force, but the rest wanted to wait. Then the Tatar mate shouted, 'I'm going along!' And that meant quite a loss to him. The boss owed him for the last two trips; and here he was finished with half of a third. Quite a piece of money to be forfeiting! We argued it back and forth through the night, and in the end seven of our crew left, about a third of the crew. That's the pull the forest has on people!"

"Did they turn bandits?"

"Possibly; or hermits. That wasn't settled then."

Grandma crossed herself. "Mother of God! Just thinking about people makes you sorry for them."

"The same reasoning power is given to us all. That's what the Devil catches on."

Our path through the forest was a muddy one that wound between damp mounds and slender pines. It seemed to me a good thing to do to go live in the woods like Cyril of Porekha—no jabbering humans, no quarrels, no drunks. It would be possible there to forget grandpa's nauseating stinginess, mama's grave in the porous sand, which saddened me, which bore down on my heart like weights.

Coming to a dry spot grandma said, "How about a bite now? Let's sit down."

In a cloth were bread, onions, salt, cucumbers and cottage cheese, which she had carried all the way in a basket. Grandpa

blinked at the spread confusedly, and said, "But I didn't bring any food, mother."

"There's enough for all of us."

For a backrest we had a pine trunk that rose tall as a mast. The air smelled resinous. A light breeze blew in from the fields, setting the grass waving. Then grandma went, picking herbs in her dark hands, telling me, as I went with her, what were the medicinal or occult powers of the plants and ferns she was gathering. Grandpa went to cut up the fallen logs. My part was to haul the hewn wood onto one pile; but I couldn't resist following grandma, who seemed to float between the rugged trunks, and to dive when she bent over to pick among the pine cones. All the while she kept talking to herself, "Too early, again, hardly a mushroom around. Lord, how badly you look after your poor. Mushrooms are the delicacy of the poor."

I tried to move noiselessly, to avoid attracting her notice, and to avoid distracting her from her chats with God, the plants and the frogs. But she caught sight of me.

"You've slipped away from grandpa?" And leaning over the dark earth, so splendidly arrayed in its flower embroidery, she discoursed of the time when God, furious with mankind, sent the flood that drowned all living things. "But the tender Mother of God had taken care to gather the seeds of everything in a basket which she hid away; and after the flood, she urged the sun, 'Dry the earth from top to bottom, and what praise you'll get from all the people!' After the sun dried the earth she planted the seed. God took a look. He saw the earth covered again with life—plants, people, animals. 'Who did all this against my will?' he demanded. And she confessed, and as it turned out, God Himself had regretted seeing the earth lifeless, so He gave her His approval. 'That was well done.'"

I found this story to my liking, but I was confused by it. I told her, with some concern, "But did that really happen? Because the Mother of God wasn't born until long after the flood."

That startled grandma. "Who said that?"

"It's in the books at school."

Reassured by that, she advised me, "If it's only in books, you can forget it. They lie, those books." And with a quiet laugh,

she said, "Think of it, little fool. God was; but not His mother? How was He born then?"

"I don't know."

"That's good. It's quite a piece of learning to be able to say, 'I don't know.'"

"The priest said the Mother of God was the daughter of Anna and Joachim."

That made grandma angry. She turned upon me with a sharp look. "If that's what you think, I'll smack you!" And, a little later, she went on to explain. "The Blessed Virgin came before everybody and everything. She gave birth to God and then—"

"But what about Christ?"

Grandma had no answer, shutting her eyes in perplexity.

"What about Christ?"

I realized that I had won; but it was not pleasing to me to have trapped her in religious mysteries.

We went deeper and deeper into the forest, into the bluish haze penetrated by the golden sunbeams, and pervaded by a soft hum, a dream sound that provoked one to dreaming. Through it could be heard the crossbills' song, the tinkle of the titmouse, the piping of the goldfinch, the chuckle of the cuckoo, the loud, insistent tune of the chaffinch, and the brooding note of that strange bird, the grosbeak. At every step we seemed to intrude upon emerald-green frog families. Like a sentry guarding the roots of a tree, an adder lay coiled, its golden head erect. We heard a squirrel crack a nut and saw its furry tail bobbing among the pine branches. The farther we went the more there was to see.

Seeming to play among the pine trees were gigantic airy phantoms that kept dissolving in the massed green, through which shone the blue and silver sky. And one walked on a luxurios moss carpet, dotted with bilberries; and the grass was flecked with moorberries as with drops of blood. And from everywhere rose the strong, appetizing odor of mushrooms. "Holy Virgin, glorious light of earth!" prayed grandma, breathing deeply.

In the forest, too, she conducted herself like the mistress of an establishment, at home among her brood. With a bearlike

waddle she went on, giving everything an interested look, and a word of praise, and thanksgiving. It was as if she radiated warmth upon the forest; and it gave me particular satisfaction to see the moss after she had stepped on it, rear up again.

And as we went on, the life of the bandit appealed to me; to strip hoarders and give the loot to the needy; to bring contentment to all; no one envying his neighbor, nor abusing him; no more snapping at each other like snarling curs. It was good, then, to take it up with grandma's God, and her Holy Virgin; to let them know of the disagreeable way people live, how they entombed each other in heaps of abuse, like a burial under dirty sand. So much avoidable ugliness and torment had to be endured on earth! And I thought, If the Holy Virgin gives heed to what I tell her, let her endow me with the necessary understanding and I will reconstruct everything, and better our life. And what if I was not an adult? The wise men had taken the counsel of Christ when He was but a year older.

And thus, self-absorbed, I stepped into a pit, bruising my hip and the nape of my neck. Mired in the cold slime at the bottom, which was as gluey as tree-gum, it exasperated me to realize that I would not be able to get out by myself; and I wanted beyond everything not to call grandma and alarm her. But there was nothing else for me to do; and she soon had me out. Crossing herself, she said, "Lord be praised! What good fortune this bear pit was empty! Where would you be if the master of the house had been in?" But she wept through her laughter.

She led me to a stream, where she washed my bruises, poulticed them with healing herbs, and bandaged them with strips ripped from her chemise; and left me at a railway signal station, for I was too lame to walk all the way back. And from then on, almost every day, I proposed to grandma, "Let's go to the forest." She went willingly, and thus we passed through the summer and far into the fall, bringing back stores of herbs, berries, mushrooms and nuts, the sale of which gave us our living. "Lazy beggars, you!" shrilled grandpa, though we took not a crumb of his bread.

The forest gave me a relaxing sense of peace in which my grievances seemed to ebb, in which everything displeasing

seemed to be dissolved. My senses seemed to sharpen, too; eyes and ears became keener, my memory more tenacious, my range of feeling widened.

And I gained new respect for my amazing grandmother. I had come to regard her as a higher being, the kindest and most understanding creature on earth, and what I saw her do continuously confirmed this judgment. Returning one evening from gathering white mushrooms, grandma sat down for a minute's rest, just as we emerged from the woods, while I cut back into the woods to look for more mushrooms. Suddenly I heard her admonishing a famished-looking gray dog, whose tongue was slavering, while she was calmly trimming a mushroom, "Now, go away, you! Go, and God be with you!"

Valek having recently poisoned my dog, I immediately thought of replacing him with this one, and ran after him. He hunched himself up in a peculiar way, seeming not to move a muscle of his neck; and after a glance out of his hungry green eyes, he lunged into the woods, his tail between his legs. He did not turn at my whistle, but scurried more frantically to cover; and in everything his movements were not quite a dog's.

"You saw him," said grandma, smiling. "I didn't realize it at first. I took him for a dog, until I gave him a second look and saw my mistake. He had the fangs and neck of a wolf. Gave me quite a scare. I said to him, 'If you're a wolf better clear out!' It's lucky woves aren't dangerous in the summer."

She felt no fear in the woods and never lost her way. She could smell out the presence and type of a mushroom by the scent of the grass. At times she quizzed me in mushroom lore. "What kind of tree does this mushroom take to? How do you tell the safe from the poisonous kind?"

By hardly visible claw-marks in the bark, she would tell me in what tree a squirrel had his hollow, and climbing up, I would rob him of his winter supply of nuts, getting as much as ten pounds at a time. But once, despoiling a squirrel, a squirrel hunter's gun spoiled me, imbedding twenty-seven pellets in my ribs. Grandma probed out eleven of them with a needle; the rest lodged in my skin for years, gradually working out to the surface.

Grandma was delighted with me for making no fuss over the pain. "Brave lad," she said. "The patient one turns out the clever one."

Whenever the sale of her mushrooms and nuts left her something over, she put it on window sills as "secret alms," though she herself lacked a whole garment, even for Sundays.

"You're shabbier than the beggars," grumbled grandpa, in one of their increasingly frequent quarrels, "You make me ashamed of you."

"What concern is it of yours? I'm not your daughter. I'm not hunting a husband."

"I have no more sins on my head than others," complained grandpa. "Why must I bear a heavier punishment?"

And grandma needled him, "What you're worth is something only the devil can say." And she would tell me, in confidence, "My old man's scared of devils. How senile he's getting! It's fear that's aging him, the poor man!"

That summer in the forest had hardened me and turned me into something of a savage, taking away what interest I had in those of my own age, like Ludmilla, whose common sense I found a bore.

One day grandpa came back from town soaked through; the autumn rains had come. As he stood in the doorway, shaking himself like a sparrow, he announced with the tone of one who had scored a victory, "Look here, you young scamp, tomorrow you're going off to a new job."

"Where to?" asked grandma, annoyed.

"To your sister Matrena's son."

"You've made a bad mistake, father."

"Shut up, idiot! They'll make a man of him."

Grandma made no reply, but her head drooped.

That night I told Ludmilla I was going off to town. "I'm being taken there, too, soon," she said moodily. "Papa wants to have my leg amputated. I'll get well when it's off."

She had lost weight that summer; her complexion had turned bluish and her eyes looked larger.

"Are you frightened?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered, and fell into silent weeping.

My own gloomy anticipations of life in town left me too

dispirited to console her. For a long time, in silent misery, we sat close together. Had it been summer I should have proposed to grandma that we go off as wandering beggars, as she had done when she was a child, taking Ludmilla, whom I would pull along in a hand cart with us. But summer was gone. Rainy winds blew through the streets; the sky was packed with storm clouds; the whole earth seemed to scowl, to have taken on a look of grimy misery.

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Chapter Four

BACK IN THE CITY, IN A TWO-STORY, WHITE HOUSE, THAT GAVE me the impression of a mass coffin. The house was new, yet it had a sick look, blown up like a beggar who had struck it rich and had overeaten. It stood at an angle to the street, had eight windows per story, but only four where its street face should properly have been. Those on the ground floor had the back yard and the narrow passage to it for a view; those on the upper floor were provided a view of a laundress' hut and a ravine.

There was no street, in any understandable sense of the word. Before the house ran an unkempt ravine, intersected by a narrow dam. On the left the ravine stretched to the jail. With its jumble of rotting wood and filth, it had the look of a public dump, with a pool of green slime at the bottom; a similar stretch on the right, terminated in a stagnant pond. The house stood exactly midway, opposite an expanse of litter and muck, overgrown with briars and weed grass, and a patch cleared as a garden by the priest, Pokrovsky, who had erected there a summer house of red-painted laths, so thin that a hurled stone could crack them. The place was unbearably dreary and degradingly filthy. Autumn had cruelly pounded this filth-laden earth till it had become a sort of red goo that dragged at one's feet. I had never before seen that much dirt in that little space; and, having grown used to the cleanly fields and woods, this littered nook roused my aversion.

Beyond the ravine were stretches of gray, sagging fences; I recognized the house, not far off, where I had stayed when I had worked as the door boy in the shoe store; and its proximity added to my depression.

I was already acquainted with my boss. He and his brother

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had once paid visits to mama; and it was his brother who had sung the comic tune, "Daddy Andy."

They showed no change. The boss, hook-nosed and long-haired, had the same friendly manner and seemed a kind man; his younger brother, Victor, retained his horse-length of face and his freckles. Their mother, grandma's sister, was an ill-tempered nag. The boss' wife was an imposing-looking creature with a skin as white as bread made of fine flour, and big dark eyes. The very first day she twice informed me, "I gave your mother a silk dress trimmed with jet."

I was reluctant, for some reason, to believe that she had given a present and that mama had accepted it. At the second announcement I told her, "So you gave it to her; all right; it's nothing to brag about."

She started from me, exclaiming, "What? Who do you think you're talking to?" And red spots blotted her face, her eyes rolled, and she yelled for her husband. He appeared in the kitchen with a pair of compasses in his hand, and a pencil stuck behind his ear; he heard his wife out, and ordered me to "Speak respectfully to her and to everybody here; no insolence!" Then he turned on his wife. "Don't bother me with nonsense!"

"Nonsense? What do you mean! If your relations——"

"To hell with my relations!" cried my boss, and rushed off.

It was disagreeable for me to think of these people as grandma's relations. I had learned from experience that relatives treat each other worse than strangers. Knowing more of their vices and follies, they can be more wounding in gossip; and they are quicker to quarrel.

I liked my boss. The gestures with which he tossed back his hair and tucked it behind his ears were graceful, and in some ways he recalled Good Idea. A cheerful laugh came easy to him; the look in his gray eyes was friendly; and his hooked nose nested within humorous wrinkles. "Eh, you wild geese," he would say to his mother and his wife. "Haven't you tormented each other long enough!" And his small, even teeth showed in an amiable smile.

Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law pecked at each other perpetually. It astonished me how readily they could slip into a quarrel. They were at it as soon as they were up; they would

tramp through the house as if it were afire, before their hair was done or their dresses fastened; and they went on all day long, only stopping for a breath at meals. Even in the dining room, after stuffing themselves till they could cram in nothing more, they made food the theme of a languid debate, in preparation for the big quarrel. No matter what the mother-in-law had cooked, the daughter-in-law would complain, 'It's not the way mother cooked it.'

"Then it was badly cooked."

"Far from it; hers was much tastier."

"So, go back to your mother."

"I'm mistress in this house!"

"And what am I?"

And the boss would cut in. "Enough, you wild geese! What's the matter with you? Have you gone crazy!"

For no understandable reason, everything in that household was queer and ludicrous. To get to the dining room from the kitchen you had to pass through a closet, the only one in the house; and so, through that closet went the samovar and the food; and that, alone, gave rise to witty sallies and comical confusions. My bed was a couch between the entrance to that closet and the entrance to the cellarway. This exposed me, at the head, to the heat from the cook stove, and at the feet to the cold draft from the cellar stairs. On retiring I used to wrap around my feet all the floor mats I could pick up.

Peculiarly drab and depressing was the parlor, with its two full-length mirrors, its gilt-framed portraits, its set of card tables, and its dozen Vienna cane chairs. There was a smaller parlor, crowded with upholstered furniture, wedding gifts, silver plate and tea service. Among its adornments were three lamps, each of which seemed bigger than its two rivals. There was also a windowless bedroom furnished with an extra-size bed, and chests and closets which gave off scents of leaf tobacco and Persian camomile. These three rooms were left unused, the whole household crowding into the far from spacious dining room.

Immediately after breakfast, about eight o'clock, the boss and his brother set up their table and laid out sheets of drafting paper, drafting instruments, pencils and tiny bowls of

India ink; and taking their places at the two ends of the table, set to work. The table, which almost filled the room, wobbled; coming out of the nursery, the boss' wife or the maid might bump a corner, and Victor would complain, "Don't come barging in here!"

"Basil!" the boss' wife would call out, indignantly, "tell him to stop shouting at me!"

"All right; but see you don't shake the table," he would reply, placatingly.

"How can I help it? I'm pregnant and the room's so crowded!"

"Then we'll work in the parlor."

To which she snorted, angrily, "Heavens! Think of using the parlor for a workroom!"

From the closet door emerged the wrathful face of the mother-in-law, reddened from the heat of the stove. She called out, "That's her! She must get in your way! The other four rooms aren't enough for her!"

As Victor enjoyed a laugh, the boss shouted, "That's enough!"

His wife slumped theatrically into a chair and moaned, "I'm dying! I'm dying!"

"Don't keep me from my work, damn you!" roared the boss, pale with exasperation. "Might as well be in a madhouse as here! And me wearing myself out to keep you, you wild geese!"

In the beginning these rumpuses alarmed me, especially the time the boss' wife, grabbing a knife off the table, locked herself in the closet and started shrieking hysterically. In a moment of calm the boss, who had failed to force the door, told me, "Climb up my back and unhook the door."

I mounted his back, broke the glass pane in the door, but when I put my head through the opening, the boss' wife gave me a cut on the head with the knife. Nevertheless, I managed to unhook the door and the boss tugged his wife into the dining room where, after a tussle, he retrieved the knife. In the meanwhile, sitting in the kitchen nursing my rapped head, I decided that all my sufferings had been wasted. That blunt knife could scarcely saw through bread, and could never have nicked the skin. Neither had there been any point in my scaling up the boss' back; I could as easily have smashed the glass from a

chair; and in any event, the unhooking would have been simpler for one of the men, whose arm had a longer reach. After that commotion I was no longer upset by these scenes.

The brothers were in the church choir and they sang as they worked. The older brother, a baritone, would begin: "The maiden's heart was in the ring I threw into the sea"; and the younger brother, a tenor, joined in: "and with that very ring I wrecked her joy on earth."

From the nursery would come the peevish voice of the boss' wife, "Are you out of your heads? The baby's just fallen asleep"; or, "Basil, you a married man, singing a song like that! And any minute the vesper bell will ring!"

"What's the row now? This is a church tune!" To which the boss' wife gave answers implying that it was not seemly to sing church tunes any which place; and besides—pointing significantly at the little door.

"We'll just have to move, or what on earth will become of us!" And just as regularly he spoke of getting a new work table—spoke of it for three years running.

Hearing my bosses on the subject of other people reminded me of the shoe store, where I had heard the same sort of talk. Obviously here too they considered themselves the elect of the town; they knew the laws of proper behavior to the last punctilio; and, conforming to those laws, which were hazy to me, they dealt out ruthless judgments upon others. This passing of sentences on others engendered a fierce and resentful wrath in me toward the precepts of my employers; and it became one of my pleasures to break them.

I was kept well occupied. I did all the chores of a house servant; I gave the kitchen a thorough going over on Wednesday, mopping the floor, and cleaning the samovar and the pots; on Saturdays I washed the floors of the other rooms and the two staircases. I also split firewood and hauled it in; I cleaned and cut up vegetables; I helped the boss' wife at her marketing, carrying the basket home; and I ran errands to the drugstore and other shops. But my real taskmaster was grandma's sister, a loud, domineering, fierce old woman. She was up at six, hurriedly washed herself, and, still in her underwear, went to the icon corner to pester God with appeals and complaints

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concerning herself, her sons and her daughter-in-law. "Lord," she would whine, with her two index fingers and thumbs pressed to her temples, "I ask you for nothing; there's nothing I want, only a little rest, a little peace. Lord, let it be by Thy power!"

Awakened by her groans, and still half-asleep, I would watch her from under my blanket, hearing her impassioned prayers with a sort of terror. Through rain-streaked panes the autumn morning would look feebly in. In the cold half-light, her shadowy figure waved from side to side on the floor, and her arms thrashed about in alarming gestures. Her thinning hair whipped over her nape and her shoulders, out of the kerchief that kept slipping down, and which she replaced, with irritated proddings of her left hand, and irritated mutterings, "Nuisance!"

Slapping her forehead violently and thumping her breast and her back, she would plead, "And please, Lord, take my troubles into account and punish my daughter-in-law. Make her atone for the suffering she has caused me. And open my son's eyes, and Victor's. O Lord, give Victor help, be compassionate toward him!"

Victor also had his bed in the kitchen, and hearing his mother's moaning, would call out, "Tattling on the young wife again! Disgraceful!"

"It's all right; you go to sleep," the old woman would reply in a guilty whisper. There would be a minute or so of silence, and then the vindictive muttering would resume, "May their bones crack; may there be no roof over their heads on earth, O Lord!"

Not even grandpa's prayers had been so horrible. Her prayers over, she would rouse me, "Up with you! You'll never amount to anything if you don't get up early. Start the samovar! Bring in the firewood! Didn't you split some last night?"

To avoid hearing that foaming mumble of hers, I would speed through everything; but there was no satisfying her. Through the kitchen she would storm after me, "Quieter, you imp! You wake Victor up, and I'll give it to you! Hurry to the bakery!"

On weekdays, I would buy two pounds of white bread and

some rolls for the boss' wife. When I came in with the package, the two women would look it over suspiciously, and heft it with their palms, and ask, "Didn't they put something in for good measure? No? Just open your mouth!" And they would crow triumphantly, "See! There's the pieces between his teeth! He's wolfed down what they put in for good measure. See that, Basil?"

I did my work with a will. The expulsion of dirt gave me some satisfaction as I mopped floors, scoured pots or polished doorknobs. From time to time, in the peaceful intervals, I heard the comments of the women upon me, "He's no shirker." "And he's clean." "But he's impertinent." "But, mother, what sort of education has he had?"

And both strove to educate me to accord them a respect I could not feel, since, in my estimation, they were morons. I disliked them, wouldn't obey them, and talked back to them. Apparently perceiving the small effect their tirades had, the boss' wife would interject, more and more frequently, "You should keep in mind what a poor family you come from. I gave your mother a silk dress trimmed with jet." To which I replied one day, "Do you want my skin in payment for that dress?"

"Heavens," she cried out in agitation, "he's likely to set the house on fire!"

This startled me. What made her say such a thing? Both women complained about me to the boss after this interchange, and he was quite severe with me. "Watch your step, my boy!" However, he took another occasion to reproach his wife and his mother. "What a pair you are! Is the boy a horse that you work him like that? Another lad would have cleared out of here long ago—that is, if you hadn't already worked him to death."

This stung the women to tears, and his wife had a tantrum and berated him. "Think of saying that in his presence, you long-haired idiot! How will I ever manage him now? And in my condition!"

As for his mother, she affected sadness, "May God forgive you, Basil. I warn you, you're spoiling him."

They went out fuming, and the boss remarked irritably,

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"See, you scamp, the scenes you get me into! Back you'll go to your grandpa and your ragpicking."

This slight was beyond my endurance, and I replied, "I was better off ragpicking. I was taken on as an apprentice, but what training have you given me? Emptying the slop pails?"

He grabbed at my hair, but without rancor; and looking straight in my eyes, he said in a wondering tone, "So, you're rebellious, huh? That won't go with me, my boy. No sir!"

And I thought I would be packed off. Instead, a few days afterward, he appeared in the kitchen with a roll of drawing paper, a pencil, a ruler and a square, and told me, "When you're through with those knives, copy this." And he pointed to a front projection of a two-story house, agape with windows, and grotesquely overdecorated. "And here's a pair of compasses. Put dots on the paper where you want your lines to end, and draw the lines with the ruler, the lines that go across, first—the horizontal lines—and the lines that go up and down—the vertical lines. Now get going."

I was delighted with this change to clean work, yet I stared at the paper and the instruments apprehensively, knowing nothing about their use. However, I washed my hands and set to. I copied all the horizontal lines and compared them with those on the original and found them good enough, except that there appeared to be an excess, three extra to be exact. Then after drawing in the vertical lines I was astonished to find that I had given the house quite another face. I had started a migration of the windows, one leaving the frame altogether suspended in the air. The entrance stairway had climbed up to the second story; a roof corner and a gable had got dislocated, one on the center of the roof, and the other tilted over the chimney.

Hardly able to keep back my tears, I stared at these prodigies of error, seeking the causes for their occurrence. Unable to locate them, I sought to compensate with flights of fancy. On the face of the house and along the roof-coping and over the cornices, I drew in crows, pigeons and sparrows; and on the street level, under the windows, I placed crippled passersby, who carried umbrellas which failed to cover their deformities.

Then I ruled slanting lines over the whole and delivered the results to the boss.

He rumpled his hair, and with eyebrows raised in astonishment, inquired gruffly, "What's all this?"

"That's rain falling. In the rain the house looks slanting because of the slant of the rain. About the birds—all these are birds—they're getting in out of the rain. That's what they do when it rains. And these people are hurrying home. That lady there, she had a fall; and that peddler, he sells lemons."

"Much obliged for the explanation," said the boss; then, leaning over till his hair brushed the paper, he burst into laughter and cried, "Akh, you ought to be torn up and thrown into the wastebasket yourself, you wild one!"

The boss' wife came in and, taking a look at my work, told her husband, "Beat him!"

But the boss replied placidly, "Never mind. My own apprentice work was no better."

And crossing out my work with a red pencil, he handed me some more paper. "Try it again."

The second attempt was more successful, except for a window that supplanted the door. But not relishing a vacant house, I tenanted it. I sat ladies with fans and suitors with cigarettes at the windows. I had a non-smoking suitor "make a nose" at the others. I placed a cabman at the doorstep and a dog at his feet. But the boss demanded, "Why all these scrawls over it again?"

When I went into my feelings about a house without people, he said impatiently, "To hell with this fooling around. If you have a mind to learn, put your mind to it. This is nonsense."

When finally I succeeded in making a copy close enough to the original, he was delighted. "Now, see what you can do! It's up to you, now, let's go on." And he began instructing me. "Draw a plan of this house indicating the arrangement of the rooms, the locations of doors and windows and so on. I won't show you how. Work it out yourself."

I took the sheet to the kitchen, and pondered over it. How was I to go about it? And right there my studies in draftsmanship came to a halt. Wrathfully the boss' mother charged upon me, hissing, "So, you want to draw!"

Grabbing me by the hair, she banged my head on the table with such force as to bruise my nose and my lips; and she snatched up the sheet of paper, tore it into bits, grabbed up the drawing kit, and with her hands on her hips, in a stance of victory, she crowed at me, "Who could endure it? Giving this work to an outsider, while his own flesh and blood, his own brother, has to go hunting for work!"

In rushed the boss, his wife pell-mell after him, and what a scene followed! All three shrieking and spitting at each other, with the women in tears at the end, and the boss telling me, "Forget the idea for the time being. Look what it got us into!"

He had my sympathy, poor man, so overwhelmed and deafened by the shrieking women. It had already been obvious to me that the old woman resented my studying; she had done her best to prevent it. Before I sat down at my drafting paper, I had always asked, "Do you want me for anything?" And she had scowled and replied, "When I do, I'll let you know." And in a matter of a few minutes, she would find an errand for me to go on, or she would say, "Isn't that a beautiful job you did on the stairs today? Dirt in every corner! Go over there, and sweep it clean!"

I would find nothing to sweep, at which she would cry out, "How dare you contradict me?"

She spilled liquids over my drawings; one time it was *kvass*, another time oil from the icon lamp. The tricks she played on me were worthy of a child, as naively calculated, and with as naïve attempts to cover them up. Nowhere else have I seen a person so quick to boil up with rage, on provocations so trifling, or so joyously passionate in her complaints. Complaining is a common enough failing; but she went at it with such gusto you would think she were singing!

Her love for her son Victor was a mania. I could laugh at it, yet it also alarmed me by what can only be called its delirious intensity. There were times, after her morning prayers, when she would stand on the oven ledge, her elbows resting on the headboard of the bedding on the oven, and exclaim in feverish whispers, "My good fortune! My little god! Drop of my own warm blood . . . diamond pure . . . light as an

angel plume . . . Ah, sleep, child, and dream yourself such a bride, the beauty who outshines them all . . . a princess, an heiress, daughter of a millionaire! And your enemies, let them die at birth; and your friends, let them all live to a hundred; let the girls flock after you like hens after the cock."

All of which I found insanely ludicrous. The vulgar loafer, Victor, had a nose big and patchy as a woodpecker's beak, and the same dull obstinacy of character. If his mother's whispers awoke him, he would let go in a surly, sleepy mumble, "The devil with you, ma! What's the idea, snorting in my face! Life is unbearable with you around!" At which she would sometimes sneak away, with an apologetic laugh. "So, sleep. Sleep, you fresh boy!" But at other times she seemed to collapse, her feet clattering against the oven, and with panting exclamation, as if her tongue were on fire, she hissed out, "How? Your own mother you're sending to the devil! Ekh, you! You disgrace, you curse upon my heart! The devil must have fastened himself in me at your birth, to see to your ruin!"

Obscenities streamed from her, the filth of the street corners, making it a trial to listen to her. She slept poorly, nervously hopping off the oven again and again at night, and crawling over and waking me.

"What's the matter?"

"Sh!" and staring at something in the dark, she would cross herself and whisper, "O God, and the prophet Elias, and Barbara the Martyr, keep me from a sudden death!"

With a shuddering hand she lit a candle, and her round, large-nosed face showed up, swollen, tense, and her gray eyes turned alarmed blinks at familiar things that looked unfamiliar in the dim light. The large kitchen looked small, sectioned off by the shadowy trunks and cupboards. The moonbeams lived their quiet life; the little icon light flickered; in their rack on the wall, the knives glittered like icicles, while the black frying pans on the floor turned up what seemed to be eyeless faces.

The old woman would let herself carefully down the oven, as if she were wading off a river bank, and sliding along barefoot, would go to the washstand in the corner, over which hung a wide-mouthed pitcher that made me think of a decapitated

head. Another pitcher on the stand contained water, which she drank, choking and gasping; afterward she stared through the windows, right through the bluish frost traceries on the glass, saying, "Mercy, oh Lord, mercy!" in whispered prayer. Then she snuffed out the candle, knelt, and mumbled querulously, "Lord! Who has any love for me, who has any need of me?"

Climbing back on the oven, she opened the chimney vent, felt for the flue valve to see if it were in line, and got soot on her hand. The following moment, exactly, she dropped off to sleep as if felled by an invisible fist. In moments of anger toward her, I thought, what a shame grandpa hadn't married her. What a life they would have led each other!

Time after time she made me utterly wretched; but there were days when sadness covered her bloated face, tears filled her eyes, and she said plaintively, "Think I've got it easy? I brought children into the world, raised them, put them on their feet and what for? To be their house servant! Think that's a blessing? My son takes a stranger, and strange blood into the family. Think that suits me? Eh?"

"Of course not," I admitted.

"That's how it is, see?" And she would begin obscenely running down her daughter-in-law. "When I went to the bath with her I saw what she had. She's got nothing to brag about. Who'd call her a beauty?"

There was vulgarity in everything she said about the marital relation. In the beginning my reaction was one of disgust; but becoming accustomed to it, I began to follow it with attentive interest, perceiving in it some painful truths. "Woman has the power. She put it over on God, Himself! That's a fact!" The old woman chuckled, slapping the table. "Through Eve, we're all damned to Hell. How about that?" On the theme of the power of a woman she could go on interminably, and I had the impression that her talk was intended to be overheard and alarm somebody. The phrase, "Eve put it over on God," particularly stayed with me.

The wing of an apartment house overlooked our yard. Of its eight flats four were tenanted by officers, and a fifth by the regimental chaplain. The yard swarmed with orderlies and

valets, with washerwomen, nursemaids and cooks trailing after them. Romantic dramas were enacted in every kitchen to accompaniments of tears, tirades and squabbles. There were fights between the soldiers, between the soldiers and workmen, and a continual beating of women.

In the yard there was a constant babbling of so-called vice and depravity, that is the overpowering appetites of robust youth. There were demonstrations of brutal sensuality, of insensate tyrannizing, of the obscene swagger of the "lady killers"; and they were all minutely gone over by my employers at their meals. Slavering over the miseries of others, the old woman, up on all the tragedies of the yard, retold them with avidity. The boss' wife listened absorbed, with smiles of pleasure on her full lips. Victor's response was the belly laugh; but the boss would exclaim, frowning, "Let's have an end to that, mama!"

"Lord, I'm not even permitted to speak, now!" complained the story teller, with Victor egging her on, "Go ahead, ma, who's stopping you? We're all your own here, aren't we?"

It never failed to puzzle me, how they could mouth such obscenities among themselves.

The boss shunned his mother, toward whom his attitude was one of pitying contempt. When she was with him, she either showered him with grievances against his wife, or with appeals for money, which he would meet by hurriedly stuffing a ruble note or some silver into her hand, saying, "I shouldn't; but take it. I don't grudge it to you, but it's not right."

"I'm going to church; I need it for alms and candles."

"There's nobody to give alms to. You use it to spoil Victor."

"You have no love for your brother. That's your great sin." And he would stalk away, waving her off.

Victor's attitude toward his mother was one of coarse derision. That glutton was always hungry. On Sundays, when the old woman baked custards, she would hide some in a pot under my couch. On leaving the table Victor would make for this cache, and as he devoured it, grumble, "Couldn't you have left me a couple more, you old dope!"

"Hurry up; get done before they see you."

"So I'll tell them you steal sweets for me behind their backs."

Once I rifled two of the custards and ate them, for which Victor short of murdered me. Our dislike of each other was hearty and mutual. I had to take his abuse. Several times a day he made me shine his shoes. When I slept in the attic he would pry up the trap door and spit through the crack, with my head for his target. Probably aping his brother, whose favorite expletive was "wild geese," Victor interlarded his conversation with catch phrases, but his were ludicrously inane: "Mama, you left wheel, where's my socks?" And me he tormented with idiotic quizzes, "Tell me, Alex, why do we write *sinenki*, but pronounce the word *finiki*? And why *kolokola*, instead of *okolo-kola*? And *k'derevou* instead of *gdye plachou*?"

I found the manner of speaking of all of them uncouth. Having been brought up to the harmonious diction of my grandparents, it startled me to hear contradictory words joined together, like "terribly funny" or "dying to eat" or "awfully happy." I wondered how anything funny could be terrible, how it could be awful to be happy, or how one could die of the desire to eat.

"Can you say that?" I asked, only to be jeered at: "Listen to the teacher! Want your ears plucked?"

The plucking of ears itself made no sense to me. You could "pluck" grass, flowers, fruit, but not ears. Their efforts to prove to me that ears could be plucked were without effect; I would exclaim victoriously, "Just the same, you've not plucked my ears."

All about me I saw cruel arrogance and conscienceless obscenity. I found it worse by far than the "disorderly houses" and the "street walkers" of the Kunavin streets. To account for the muck and coarseness of the latter, there was toil and a strained and famished life. But people here were overfed and comfortable, and their work was easy and unworried. Yet everything was overcast with a nervous, insidious exhaustion.

Hard as my life here was, grandma's visits made it harder. She would come through the back way into the kitchen, cross herself under the icon, and bow to her younger sister. That genuflection bowed me down as under a smothering burden.

"Is that you, Akulina?" was the hostess' coolly indifferent greeting.

Grandma was unrecognizable. Her lips humbly shut, her face a blank, she seated herself on a bench at the door and kept still, in guilty silence, until spoken to, when she answered her sister deferentially. This tortured me, and I would exclaim, bitterly, "What are you sitting there for?"

With a gentle wink at me, she replied, "Quiet, you. You're not the boss, here."

"He's always butting in where it's none of his business, no matter how many beatings and scoldings he gets," complained the old woman, off on her usual tirade.

How often the spiteful woman would throw it up to her sister, "So you've taken to begging?"

"That's my misfortune."

"It's no misfortune to those who feel no shame."

"Christ, they say, also lived on alms."

"Who says so?—dopes and heretics; and you, you old idiot, pay attention to them. Christ wasn't a beggar; he was the Son of God. He'll come, as it is said, in glory, in judgment on the quick and the dead—the dead, too, you understand. You won't get away from Him, not even if you were in ashes. You and your Basil are getting it now for your pride; for the way you treated me when you were rich and I came to you for help!"

"And I gave you all I was able to give," answered grandma, patiently. "And God, you know, He'll pay us back."

"It was a trifle you gave, just a trifle!"

Her sister's incessant tongue bored and wearied grandma. Hearing that nasty voice I wondered how grandma could endure it. At those moments I could not love her.

The boss' wife came out and nodded affably to grandma. "Come into the dining room. Come, please."

The boss always greeted grandma with pleasure. "Ah, there's Akulina, the sage. How are you? Is old Kashirin still about?"

And grandma would give him her sweet smile, "Still working hard?"

"Yes, always at it, like a convict."

The talk between them was good, and affectionate, but grandma took the tone of a senior. Sometimes their talk turned to my mother, of whom he would say, "Barbara, what a woman, a real heroine!"

His wife would interrupt to say to grandma, "Remember my giving her that dress—black silk with the jet trimmings?"

"Certainly, I remember."

"And it was in good condition."

"Yes," said the boss, "a dress, a palm; and life cheats you."²

"What do you mean by that?" asked his wife, dubiously.

"Nothing, my dear. Happiness and good souls are both soon gone."

"I can't tell what's come through you," said his wife, mystified.

Then grandma was shown the new baby, and while I was clearing off the table, the boss said to me, "A good old woman, that grandmother of yours."

Those words won my deepest gratitude. Alone with grandma I asked her, with a pang in my heart, "Why do you have to come here? Don't you see how—"

"Akh, Alex, I see it all," she replied, with a gentle smile on her wonderful face; and I had a twinge of conscience. Of course she saw it all; there was nothing she missed; not even what was agitating my soul that very moment. Looking around to make sure we were alone, she gave me a hug, and said with heat, "I wouldn't come here but for you. What do they mean to me? The truth is, grandpa's sick and I'm exhausted tending him. I haven't had a chance to do any work, so I haven't got a penny, and Mik has thrown out his son, your cousin, Sascha, and now I have to feed him, as well. They agreed to pay you six rubles a month; but I doubt if you've seen a ruble from them, and you started close to half a year ago." Then she bent down and whispered, "They tell me they have to talk to you and scold you, that you're disobedient; but, darling, stick it out. Have patience this short couple of years while you get your strength. Have patience, will you?"

²A pun on the words, *talma* (cloak), *palma* (palm), and *shelma* (Juggler.)

I gave her my promise, but it was not easy to keep. The life there was so burdensome; it was so barren and depressing. Meals were the only events; and my life passed as in a sleep. At times I thought I must run away; but winter had taken its cursed hold. Snow storms howled through the night, the wind pounded over the house, and the timbers cracked in the grip of frost. Where could I go?

I was not allowed out, and in fact, who could go out in that weather? Household chores helped to speed through the brief winter day. But I had to go to church; on Saturdays to Vespers, and on Sundays to mass.

I enjoyed church. Standing in one of the less crowded and darker nooks I loved to look at the far-away icon stand, which seemed afloat in the candle light that flowed in profuse streams over the pulpit. The shadowy figures on the icon seemed to stir with a gentle motion, the gold embroidery on the priest's vestments rustled ecstatically, the candle flames in that bluish air seemed to buzz like golden bees, and the heads of women and children seemed to nod like flowers. And everything around seemed in harmony with the chanting choir. Everything seemed touched with legend; and the church seemed to rock like a cradle, swaying in the blackness of space.

There were times when, in my imagination, the church was submerged in a deep lake, where it carried on a hidden life of its own, alien to other kinds of life. I am now quite convinced that this fancy sprang from grandma's tales of the gown of Kitezh; and often I found myself dreamily swaying, to and fro, as though in time with the rocking motion around me. Somnolent with the lulling hymns of the choir, the murmuring of prayers and the breathing of the worshippers, I dwelt on the sad and tuneful ballad,

The accursed Tatars are closing in; aye, the unclean ones are closing in on Kitezh, the glorious; they enter at the holy hour of the morning prayer. Oh, Lord God, and His Holy Mother, protect Thy servants, preserve them to sing the morning services, to hear the sacred chants. Oh, let not the holy church be made the sport of the Tatars, let them not debase our wives and

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our maidens; let not our virgins become their toys; let not our sages be tortured to death.

And the God of the Sabbath and His Holy Mother heard this human moan, these Christian entreaties. And to the Archangel Michael spoke the God of the Sabbath, "Go, Michael, give the earth under Kitezh a shake, so that Kitezh sinks under the lake!"

And to this day the people remain at prayer, without rest, yet unwearied, from matins to vespers, through all the services, forever and aye!

Grandma's ballads filled my head, in those months, as honey fills a hive. I even thought in cadences.

In church I said no prayers. I felt too embarrassed to recite the wrathful prayers and doleful psalms of grandpa's God in the hearing of grandma's God, Who, I was certain, could find as little to relish in them as I did, if for no other reason than that they were set down in books, and He had them all by heart, like all educated persons. And so, when some sorrows mellowed in my breast or the day's petty grievances harassed me, I made up my own prayers. And, at the thought of my drudgery, words of complaint seemed to link together, involuntarily.

"Lord, Lord, behold my misery; oh, let me grow up quickly, out of this unbearable existence. Forgive me, Lord, but I have no teaching to benefit from; since that servant of Satan, Matrena, stalks me like a wolf, and embitters my life."

Some of these prayers return to my mind even today. The workings of a child's mind are deeply engraved; and they can affect one's entire life.

For still another reason I enjoyed being in church. I could find repose there as I had found it in the woods and the fields. There my cramped heart, already shrunk with grief and fouled with the slime of a muddy life, could luxuriate in cloudy, soaring reveries. But I went to church only in times of hard frost, or when snow blasts stormed through the streets, when the very sky seemed ice, when the wind was like a moving sheet of snow, when the earth lay rigid under the drifts as if it would never come to life again.

But on mild nights I preferred to roam the streets, searching out the darkest corners. On such walks I sometimes felt winged and sailing like the moon above. Ahead of me crept my shadow, blotting out the reflections of light in the snow, and humorously bobbing up and down. I met the night patrolman, in his thick sheepskin, rattle in hand,³ and a dog at his side. Out of the yards came the shadowy outlines of people, and as they wavered down the street, the dogs pursued. I also passed young ladies promenading with their swains; who, it occurred to me, were also truants from church. Sometimes, through an illuminated *fortochka*,⁴ or ventilator, there drifted a peculiar odor, strange and barely perceptible, but hinting at another kind of life unknown to me. There, under the window, I inhaled the scent, trying to sense the life people lived in such houses. It was the vesper hour, yet cheerful song came from them, laughter and the sounds of a guitar, whose deep twang reverberated out of the ventilator.

I was particularly drawn to the hunched-over, one-story houses at the corners of the bare Tikhonovsky and Martinovsky Streets. Standing there of a moonlit night, intent, I listened to weird sounds. They resembled musical notes hummed loudly, which floated out with the warm, indoor air, through the ventilator. I could make out no words, but the song sounded like something I knew and understood. When I followed it, I did not hear the indolent plucking which interrupted, rather than accompanied, it. I sat on the curb thinking what marvelous music that peculiar, unendurable sort of fiddle was playing—it proved to be a cello—unendurable because I heard it with a sort of ache. The sound swelled to such volume at times that the house seemed to quake, and the windows to clatter, and from the roof moisture dropped like tears, as they did from my eyes.

The night patrolman had come upon me, unawares, and he pushed me off the curb, exclaiming, "What are you loitering here for?"

"The music," I said.

³ At night patrolling policemen in Russia carried rattles instead of whistles.

⁴ A small, hinged window, set into the storm window.

"A likely story! Get moving!"

I circled the block to return to my post under the window, but the playing had stopped. From the ventilator came hilarious sounds, so different from the sad strains I had been hearing that I thought I was in a dream. I made this house my goal every Saturday night, but only once, in the spring, did I hear the cello again, when it played on and on until midnight, earning me a thrashing when I got home.

These night sorties under the winter sky through the empty streets were an enriching experience. Deliberately I picked streets on the outskirts where there were no lights, and where I might run into no acquaintances of the boss to inform upon me, that I had stayed away from church. No drunks or prostitutes or cops molested me, and I could see into rooms on lower floors when the windows were not frosted over or curtained.

Many and varied were those pictures framed in windows—people at prayer or at cards, kissing or quarreling, and absorbed in soundless talk all through. It was a free show for me, a panorama of mute, fishlike existence. Once, through a basement window, I saw two women at a table, and a student opposite, reading to them. The younger of the two sat back in her chair, listening with knitted brows. Suddenly the older woman, thin, but with magnificent hair, put her hands over her face, and her sobbing was apparent from her heaving shoulders. The student tossed his book from him; the younger woman rose and ran out; and he got down on his knees to the woman with the abundant hair and pulled down her hands and kissed them.

In another window I saw a woman in a red blouse on the knees of a huge bearded man, who was rocking her like a baby, and apparently serenading her, for his mouth was open wide and he was rolling his eyes expressively. Shaking with laughter, she leaned back and swung her legs. He straightened her out, started up his song again, and again she burst into giggles. I watched them a long time, going away only when I realized it was going to be an all-night game.

There were many such pictures to see, that endure in my memory; and their attraction was so strong as to keep me up

late, arousing doubts in the two women, who questioned me, "What church were you at? What priest conducted the services?"

They knew all the priests, which of the gospels would be read from, in a word, everything. They could readily catch me in a lie. Both worshiped grandpa's God of wrath who preferred to be approached in fear. He was eternally on their lips. In their quarrels they menaced each other with him, "Wait! God will give it to you for this; He'll plague you for this! You'll see!"

On the first Sunday in Lent the old woman burned some fritters. Ruddy with the heat of the stove, she exclaimed in anger, "The devil with you!" Suddenly, sniffing the pan, her face clouded with dismay, she threw the pan down and moaned, "It's been used for meat! It's unclean! The grease didn't all come off on Monday when I scalded it." She went down on her knees and wept as she pleaded, "Lord God, Our Father, grant forgiveness to this accursed one! In the name of Thy passion and Thy suffering, forgive me. Withhold Thy punishment from this old fool!"

The burned fritters went to the dog, and the pan to the garbage dump, but the incident, thereafter, served the boss' wife in her quarrels, "And you fried fritters, on Lent, in a pan used for meat!"

They pulled their God into all their affairs, into every hole of their trivial existence, to give their wretched lives some semblance of significance, pretending to devote every hour to the services of the Power Above. I found this pulling and hauling of God over this desert depressing. I found myself, involuntarily, peering into dark corners, sensing invisible eavesdroppers upon me; and by night a cloud of terror enveloped me, spreading over me from the icon corner with its incessantly flickering lamp.

Beside the icon was a big double window, separated by a center post. It offered a blue block of space, and a quick motion would give you the effect of everything fusing into it, and streaming up to the stars, and being submerged in its eternal silence, like a stone sinking soundlessly in water. I have forgotten just how I rid myself of these obsessions, but I did, and

soon enough, I know it was grandma's good God to whom I turned for help, and it was then, I believe, that I came to these simple truths: that nothing evil threatened me; that I deserved no punishment when I was not at fault; that life knew no law requiring the innocent to suffer; that the sins of others could not be laid to my account.

I stayed away from mass, too, particularly in the spring, which held me back from church with an irresistible power. A seven-kopeck piece given to me to put into the collection was my ruin. I bought jacks with it, played all through the mass, and got home late, of course. And once I managed to lose the coins given to me for prayers for the dead and for the sacramental bread; and when the priest distributed it, I had to take some other person's share.

I developed quite a mania for gambling. I was equipped with skill and strength, and was soon renowned through the streets for my prowess at jacks,⁵ billiards and bowling.

During Lent I was told to get ready for communion, and I went to confess to the neighbor priest, Father Pokrovsky. He impressed me as a stern sort, and many of my sins had been at his expense. I had stoned his flimsy summer house in the garden, and I had fought with his children. Such sins, if he chose, he could himself recall. This made me fearful; and standing in his poor little church, waiting my turn in the confession box, my heart skipped some beats.

But Father Pokrovsky gave me a cheerful greeting, "Oh, it's my neighbor. Kneel down, my boy, what sins have you committed?"

Over my head he laid a piece of heavy velvet. The odors of wax and incense reached my nostrils. I found it hard to speak, and I did so reluctantly.

"Have you obeyed your elders?"

"No."

"Say, 'I have sinned.'"

Then, startling myself, I came out with, "I stole."

"How? Where?" asked the priest, slowly and reflectively.

⁵ Played for money stakes, and in a form which made it an adult gambling game.

"At the church of the Three Saints, at Pokrov, at Nikol . . ."

"So, in all the churches! That was wrong, my child; a sin, do you understand?"

"I understand."

"Say, 'I have sinned.' And why did you steal? For something to eat?"

"Sometimes; and other times it was because I lost money at games; and since I had to bring home some sacramental bread, I stole."

Father Pokrovsky said something in a tired and almost inaudible whisper; then, after a few more questions, he suddenly asked me, and his face was now very solemn, "Did you read any banned books?"

That question, of course, was beyond me, and I asked, "What books?"

"Banned books. Did you read any?"

"No. Not one."

"Rise; your sins are remitted."

I gave him an astonished glance. His look was abstracted, but kind, which intensified my bad conscience, and added to my uneasiness. By way of preparation for the confessional, my employers had stressed its terrors, and harped on the necessity of baring even the most trivial sin.

So I added to my testimony, "I threw rocks at your summer house."

Still looking past me, the priest raised his head and said, "That was very bad. You can go, now."

"I stoned your dog, too."

"Next!" Father Pokrovsky called, ignoring me.

And off I went, feeling cheated and neglected. To have been subjected to such apprehension over the confessional ordeal, only to discover that it was so harmless, even dull. The only thing about it that interested me was the matter of the banned books, of which I was entirely ignorant. I recalled the basement room reading scene, the student reading to the two women; and Good Idea's shelves of squat, black tomes with their incomprehensible diagrams.

The following day I was given fifteen kopecks and dis-

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patched to my communion. Easter was late; the snow had thawed off sometime ago; I walked through dry streets; dust already blew over the highways; and the weather was bright and genial. Close to the church some workers were rolling jacks. I said to myself, "There's still time for communion," and asked to be let into the game.

"A kopeck's the ante," said a ruddy pock-marked man, cockily.

As cockily, I began with a three-kopeck bet. I had a run of luck; two tries by an adult player, at the pair of jacks I had bet on went amiss, which brought me six kopecks winnings from grown men, and I felt elated. Then one of the players said, "Keep an eye on that kid, or he'll scoot off with his winnings."

Taking this as an insult, I showed my defiance by placing a nine-kopeck bet. The players seemed unimpressed, except for a boy of about my own age who said, "What luck he's got, that little devil from Zvezdrinsky; I know all about him."

A thin man, a furrier by the reek from his clothes, said cuttingly, "A little devil? Good!"

With a careful throw, he won my nine kopecks and turned to me, "Howl, little devil!"

My reply was a three-kopeck bet, which he accepted and lost. By the rules of the game, one could not bet on the same jacks more than three times in succession. I picked another pair and garnered four more kopecks. But there my luck ran out, and I lost my next three bets. In the meanwhile mass had been finished, the church bell's rang the close of services, and the congregation began pouring out.

The furrier asked me, "Are you married?" and made a grab at my hair, but I dodged and got away. I came to a boy, all dressed up in his holiday best, and asked him, very mealy-mouthed, "Were you at communion?"

"Suppose I was? What's it to you?"

I asked him to describe the communion rite, what the priest recited, and what my part in it would have been. He took hold of me, gave me a shaking, and terrified me with his yelling. "You heretic, staying away from communion! You won't get

a thing out of me. I hope you get a thrashing from your father!"

I ran home, dreading a quizzing, certain that my truancy would be fished out of me. But after receiving their congratulations, all the old woman asked me was, "What did you give the clerk?"

"Five kopecks," I replied, brazenly.

"And three kopecks for the other; you got away with seven kopecks, you beast!"

It was spring; and each new spring, as it came, seemed to wear something new, and be gayer and more dazzling than the last. Heady odors came from the young grass, and the birches in their fresh foliage. Maddening desires surged up in me to roam the fields, to hear the larks, to sprawl on the warm earth; but I had to clean winter coats and store them away in chests, to shred leaf tobacco, to dust around, to spend the whole day on chores that seemed to me as purposeless as they were tedious.

Nor was there a thing for me to look forward to in my free time. There was nothing to do in that dismal street to which I was confined. Exhausted, irritable workers and greasy cooks and washerwomen filled the yard; and the night scenes offered to my eyes so disgusted me, that blindness seemed a blessing.

I took to my attic, with scissors and colored paper, and cut out paper lace with which I adorned the beams. At least in this I could somehow absorb my discontent. How I yearned to be somewhere where people did not seek to sleep out time, where there were fewer quarrels; where God was not so tiresomely beset with grievances, where people did not so constantly lay harsh judgments upon each other.

The first Saturday after Easter the miracle-working icon of Our Lady of Vladimir, from the Oransky monastery, was brought into town, whose guest it was through the middle of June. It was taken to bless the houses of all the members of the congregation, and it came our turn during the middle of the week. I was doing the pots in the kitchen, when the boss' wife cried out in an agitated voice, from the nursery, "Open the door; they're bringing in the Oransky icon!"

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Sloppy from the kitchen, and with hands as gritty as a brick, I rushed down and opened the door. His own hands taken up with a lamp and a thurible, a young man grumbled good-naturedly, "Are you all in bed? Give us a hand!"

Two men carried the bulky, framed icon up the narrow stairs, with my shoulder and dirty hands adding a support at one of the corners. Behind me followed the monk, snuffling a lagging, perfunctory chant, "Holy Mother of God, pray for us!"

The frightening thought passed through my mind. "She must be mad at me for touching her with dirty hands; she'll make them wither!"

They stood the icon up in a corner, on two chairs which had been draped over with a clean sheet. At its sides were two handsome young monks with sparkling eyes, rapturous looks and beautiful hair, like angels.

There were prayers. "Oh, Celebrated Mother," chanted the big priest, but feeling under his long hair, throughout, at a swelling on the lobe of his ear. "Holy Mother of God, pray for us," droned the monks.

I knew from grandma that it was the Holy Virgin who, for the sake of the poor, had planted the earth with flowers, with all that gave joy, with all that brought blessings and beauty into life, and I loved Her. When the time came to kiss Her, taking no note of how the adults had performed the salute, I kissed Her lovingly on the cheeks, the lips. A powerful hand swept me all the way to the door. I do not recall the carrying out of the icon, but I have a vivid recollection of my employers holding a council around me, on the floor, debating my fate with tremulous anxiety.

"We'll have to talk with the priest about him," said the boss, whose scolding was free of rancor.

"Dope! How could you not know that the lips must not be kissed? You must have learned that in school!"

For some days, fearful, but resigned, I awaited divine punishment, wondering what it would be. I had put unclean hands on the icon and given it a forbidden kiss. I could not go unpunished. But the Mother of God evidently forgave the unmeant sin that proceeded from impulsive love; or perhaps Her

penalty was too light to be noticed, among the punishments so generously awarded me by the good people of the house.

And, to provoke the old woman, I observed to her, now and then, "Seems the Holy Virgin has forgotten my punishment!"

"Just you wait!" the old woman replied, viciously.

While I festooned the beams in the attic, with laces cut out of pink crepe paper from tea-packets, and tin foil, and tree leaves and other ornaments, I sang whatever popped into my head, finding words to church tunes, like the Kalmucks' singing on the roads:

"Sitting in the attic, scissors in hand, I cut and cut the paper. I'm a dullard, I'm a dunce. I'd rather be a dog and run around where I like. Instead, I hear all day, 'Sit down, shut up, if you want to wear a whole skin!'"

When the old woman took a look at my work, she laughed uproariously and said, "Why not decorate the kitchen, too?"

And when the master paid me a visit to inspect my performance, he said, sighing, "You're a droll one, a devil! What will you turn out, I wonder, a magician? Who can guess?" And he gave me one of the big Nicholas⁶ five-kopeck pieces. I wired the coin into a conspicuous position among my works of art. A few days later it was gone; and it must have been the old woman who made away with it.

⁶Minted in the reign of Nicholas I.

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Chapter Five

THAT SPRING I RAN AWAY, GOING TO THE BAKERY FOR BREAD one morning, the baker, indifferent to my presence, abused his wife, finally smashing a weight down on her forehead. Running out, she collapsed in the street. A crowd collected, and the woman was put on a stretcher and taken to the hospital in a cab, behind which I ran, without looking where I was heading. I found myself, in the end, on the banks of the Volga, with two greven (twenty kopecks) in my hand.

So caressing was the spring sunlight, such a friendly breadth did the Volga have flowing beside me, so ample and harmonious did the earth seem here, that my own existence there seemed more than ever like life in a mouse trap. So I decided not to return, nor to go back to grandma at Kunavin, for shame at not keeping my promise to her, and for fear of grandpa's jeers.

For several days I roamed the shore, getting meals and shelter for the night from charitable stevedores, in their sheds. Finally one of them said to me, "No point hanging around here, boy, you can see for yourself. I hear they're looking for a mess boy on the steamer, 'Good'; go and take a look there."

I did and was interviewed by a tall, bearded steward who wore a black silk skull cap and glasses, through which dim eyes stared at me. "Two rubles a month," he said placidly, "let's have your passport."

I had none. After thinking it over the steward said, "Bring your mother here."

I ran to grandma, who approved what I was doing, and sent grandpa to the government labor bureau for a passport for me, while she accompanied me to the boat.

"Good!" said the steward, when he saw us. "Come with me."

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He led me to the stern, where a giant of a chef, in a white apron and a white cap, sat at a little table drinking tea, without stopping, while puffing at a thick cigar. The steward pushed me toward him. "The mess boy," he said.

With an irritable toss of his close-cropped head, and a rounding out of his black eyes, he stretched himself, snorted and bellowed at me, "Who are you?"

I found him decidedly unprepossessing. He looked dirty despite his white outfit. What looked like wool seemed to grow over his fingers, and tufts of hair sprouted out of his big ears.

"I'm hungry," I replied.

With a blink, a change came over his face; his fierce expression gave way to a broad smile, that pulled his brick-red jowls all the way around to his ears, and made his mouth gape open on a display of horselike teeth. His moustache drooped and suddenly he looked like a stout, motherly woman.

Tossing the tea in his glass over the ship's side, he poured a fresh draught for me and pushed a French roll and a large cut of sausage my way. "Eat your fill. Have you got parents? Do you steal? Don't get upset. This place is full of thieves, as you'll soon learn."

His speech was like a succession of growls. His huge, bluish, clean-shaven face was knitted together around his nose with a close network of red veins; and the nose itself, bloated and purple, drooped over his moustache. His hanging lower lip was another disfigurement. From the corner of his mouth hung his smoldering cigar. He must have just emerged from a steam bath; he still smelled of the birch twigs,⁷ and beads of sweat gleamed on his temples and the nape of his neck.

After I had finished my tea, he gave me a ruble bill, saying, "Buy yourself a couple of aprons. Wait, I better go with you."

Setting his cap straight, he joined me, shambling ponderously, his feet slapping on the deck like a bear's.

The moon was bright that night as it sailed above the boat toward the meadows on the left. The ancient red craft, with its stained funnel, took its time; and her wheel cut the silvered water in clumsy strokes. Floating toward her, as though for a

⁷Used in the massage routine in Russian steam baths.

meeting, the dark shore cast its shadow over the water; further back glimmered the pert little windows of peasant huts. From the villages came song; merrymaking lassies singing—and their *Ai, Ludi* (Ah, people) came over as "Hallelujah."

In the steamer's wake, on a long towline, bobbed a big barge, also painted red. Its rail was high, making the deck a cage, within which were penned convicts bound for exile or jail. Stationed on the prow was a sentry whose bayonet gleamed like a candle flame. No sounds came from the barge, which was adrip with moonlight, but against the black metal bars gray blots could be dimly seen—convicts taking a look at the Volga. The water now seemed to sob, now to chuckle diffidently. It was as still here as in a church, and there was a similar scent of oil.

Gazing at the barge I recalled my earliest childhood, the voyage from Astrakhan to Nizhny, the rigid faces of mama and grandma, through whom I made my first acquaintance with this absorbing, though difficult, life among people. And, thinking of grandma, all that had seemed so evil and repugnant, vanished. In a sudden transformation everything grew interesting and attractive, and people acquired kinder and better selves.

I was almost stirred to tears by the loveliness of these Volga nights. I was deeply affected, too, by the coffin-like barge, looking so lost on the breadth of the flowing river, in the dreamy stillness of the warm night. The changing shoreline, now climbing up, now sloping down, was a pleasant stimulus to my imagination. There were roused in me yearnings after goodness, yearnings to serve others.

The people we had on board were a peculiar sort. Young and old, men and women, they all resembled each other. Busy people took fast boats. Ours being a slow boat, it attracted the slothful. Singing and eating all day long, they dirtied innumerable cups and plates, knives, forks and spoons, all day long. Cleaning the silver was my job, and it kept me occupied from six in the morning till near midnight, easing off in the late afternoon and toward midnight, when the passengers rested from eating and only imbibed tea, beer and vodka. My superiors, those who tended the buffet, were also free then.

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Smoury, the chef, had tea at a table near the hatchway, with his assistant, Jake, the kitchen man, Max, and Serge, a steward who was hunchbacked, whose face was pitted with smallpox, and who had oily eyes between high cheekbones. Jake told dirty stories, punctuating them with sobbing laughs that exposed his long, stained teeth. Serge's froglike mouth, grinning, spanned his face from ear to ear. Max frowned in silence, fixing his cold, colorless eyes upon the others.

"Asiatic! Mordvin!" interjected the old chef, from time to time, in his bass voice.

I did not take to these people. Bald and obese, Jake had only one subject, women, and only one attitude toward them—lustful. His vacuous face was studded with purplish pimples. On one cheek he had a mole with a tuft of red bristles, which he twisted out on the shaft of a needle. Let a woman passenger appear who was lively and not stand-offish, and he would wait on her in an odd, servile manner, like a beggar; he would make honeyed, solicitous remarks, licking her, you might say, with agile flickerings of his tongue. Somehow, it seemed to me that his sort of big, suety creature was the hangman type. "Learn how to get around women," he would tell Serge and Max, and they would take in his instructions with drooling lips and reddening faces.

"Asiatics!" Smoury would growl in disgust, and getting up heavily, he would give me my orders. "Peshkov, march!"

He would take me to his cabin, stretch out in a hammock strung up beside the ice-box, hand me a little, leather-covered book, and command me to "Read!"

Sitting on a chest, I would read, patiently: "The *umbra* pierced by a star means that the dreamer has good relations with heaven and is devoid of vice and profanity."

Smoury, puffing at a cigarette, emitted a cloud of smoke and rumbled, "The camels! They said—"

"Baring the left bosom," I went on, "indicates an innocent heart."

"Whose bosom?"

"It doesn't say."

"A woman's, of course. And a tart!"

He shut his eyes and lay back with his arms folded under

his head. His cigarette, its light reduced to a spark, drooped from a corner of his mouth. He righted it with his tongue, made a movement that sent a whistling sound out of his chest and a discharge of smoke that almost obliterated his huge face. Thinking he had fallen asleep, I sometimes quit reading the wretched book that bored me to the point of nausea. Gruffly he would order me, "Go on; read!"

"The sage responded, 'See here, Brother Suvierin.'"

"Sevierin."

"It's printed here 'Suvierin.'"

"That's witchcraft, then. There's some verse at the end. Take off from there."

I took off: "Inquisitive ones, seeking to profane our secrets; never will your weak eyes penetrate them; never will you hear the music of faery."

"Stop," said Smoury, "that's no poetry. Give me that book." After irritably leafing through it, he put it under the mattress. "Get me another."

To my misfortune, he had a big stock of books in his iron-bound trunk. They included, *Maxims of Peace*, *Memoirs of an Artillery Man*, *Letters of Lord Sydenhall*, *Harmful Insects*, *Their Extermination*, and *Advice About the Plague*—books seemingly without beginning or end. On some occasions he had me read off all the titles, interrupting me angrily, "What's it about? Why must you read as if you were spitting it through your teeth? Impossible to follow you. Who the devil's this Gervase? Gervase! And *umbra*, no less!"

Portentous words, tantalizing names, wearied my memory and pricked my tongue. I had a desire to repeat them over and over, thinking that thus, possibly, their meanings might come to me. And outside the porthole the water indefatigably lapped and sang. I would have enjoyed going to the stern where the sailors and stokers sat among the crates, where the passengers sang, gambled or told stories. I would have enjoyed sitting with them, listening to clear, understandable conversations, gazing at the banks of the Kama, at pine trees spun out like wire, at meadows where ponds, still left by the spring floods, glittered like splinters of glass, reflecting the sun.

We were sailing well offshore, yet we could hear the peal

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of bells too far away to see, that bespoke villages and people. Fishermen's dories had the appearance of crusts of bread as they floated past. Here a little village hove in sight; there a gang of boys swam along a beach; and men in red shirts walked along a sandbar. Seen from midstream everything looked diminished to multi-colored toys.

I had impulses to cry out friendly salutations toward shore and to the barge. The latter fascinated me. I could look at it endlessly, as its blunt nose dipped in the churning water. It was dragged by the steamer like a protesting pig. When the tow rope loosened, it thrashed in the water; then, tautening again, it once more tugged the barge by the nose. I desired intensely to see the faces of these people, caged like zoo animals. At Perm, where they were disembarked, I managed to get to the gangway; and gray people filed past me, in tens, with a dead tramp of feet and rattle of chains, their backs bowed under heavy packs. There was the same variety among them as among ordinary people; there were young and old, handsome and homely; their only difference was in their dress and the close shaves that disfigured their faces. Robbers, probably, but grandma has spoken well of robbers. Smoury looked much more the fierce bandit, as he glowered at the barge and growled, "Keep me, O Lord, from such a fate!"

I once asked him, "What's bothering you? You're a cook; but these are robbers and murderers."

"I don't cook; I prepare the food. The old women cook it," he said with a laugh. But after a moment's thought, he went on, "The difference in people is their wits. There's one who's clever, another who's less clever, and a third who's a plain fool. To get among the clever ones, you have to read the proper books—black magic and so on. Read all kinds of books and you'll come upon the proper ones." And he was incessantly pressing me to "Read. If you don't understand it the first go, read it again; read a book seven times if necessary, and if you still don't get it, a dozen times."

Smoury was gruff with everybody, the grim steward not excepted. With a disgusted sag of his lower lip and stroking his moustache, he stoned people with his words. Toward me he always showed consideration and concern, but something in

his concern for me made me uneasy. There were times when I thought he was mad, like grandma's sister. He would order me, "Stop reading," and lie for quite a while with eyes shut, his breathing a series of snorts, his huge belly heaving. His hairy fingers, joined across his chest like those of a corpse, worked as if with invisible needles knitting invisible socks. Then a sudden growl would issue from him, "Look at you! You've got intelligence. Use it to live! Intelligence is handed out stingily. If the intellectual level was the same for all—but it isn't! One understands, another doesn't, and some lack even the desire to understand!"

With halting words he told stories of his soldiering days. I never got their drift, and found them dull. He would begin in the middle, wherever they happened to come into his mind.

"The colonel called his soldier over and asked him, 'What did the lieutenant tell you?' So he said exactly what happened—a soldier is sworn to tell the truth—but the lieutenant looked at him as if he was a wall, and then he turned away and bowed his head. Yes—"

Indignation overcame him, and puffing out volumes of smoke, he growled, "How was I to know what to say and what to hold back? So the lieutenant was shut up in a fortress and his mother said—Lord! There's no learning I've mastered."

We had hot weather. Everything seemed to quiver; everything sizzled. The water splashed against the iron hull; the wheel turned; the wide current of the river flowed on between columns of lights. In the distance, the waving line of the meadowy bank, the trees adroop. After one's ears became attuned to all the sounds, we seemed to sail in silence, despite the mournful call of the watch, "Sev-en! Sev-en!"

There was nothing I would have cared to join in. I neither wished to listen in, nor to work at anything. All I craved was to get away into the shadows, away from the greasy, odorous kitchen heat, to sit and stare, drowsily, at the still, slow slipping-away of life through the water.

"Read!" came the chef's harsh command.

Even the chief steward feared Smoury, and the dining room steward, who was mute as a fish, also feared him. "Hey, you,

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swine!" Smoury would call to him, "Come here, thief! Asiatic!"

The sailors and stokers were in awe of him, and waited on his favors. He gave them soup meat and asked after their relatives. The oily, smoke-withered stokers, Byelo-Russians, were accounted the lowest in the ship's social scale. They were all called "Yaks"; and to tease them people would say, "I shamble along the bank like a Yak."

On hearing this, Smoury bristled, his face filled with angry blood, and he bellowed at the stokers, "Why do you let them ride you, you dopes! Throw slop in their faces!"

The boatswain, a handsome but bad-tempered man, once said to him, "They're just like Ukrainians; they have the same religion."

The chef grabbed him up by the collar and belt and shook him, "Want to be knocked to pieces?"

There were frequent quarrels between these two; and when it roughened to fighting, Smoury never got the worst of it. His strength was superhuman; besides, the captain's wife, who had a man's face and hair like a boy's, took his side.

He drank staggering amounts without ever getting drunk. He started on awakening, his eye-opener a bottle of vodka, which he downed in four swigs; after which it was beer all day, till late in the evening. As he drank, his face seemed to darken and his eyes to widen.

Some nights, he sat in the hatchway for hours, looking enormous and white, sat there in unbroken silence, his eyes moodily fixed on the far horizon. That was the time he was most feared, and when I most pitied him. Jake would emerge from the kitchen, perspiring and radiating heat. Scratching his bald skull and gesturing with his arm, he would announce, careful to keep at a safe distance and under cover, "We've gone out of fish."

"Well, there's the sauerkraut."

"What if they order fish-soup or boiled fish?"

"It's waiting for them. They can cram themselves."

Sometimes I got the courage to go to him. He gave me a heavy stare. "What do you want?"

"Nothing."

"Good."

In one of these moods I asked him, "Why are they all scared of you, since you're a good man?"

Unexpectedly, he showed no anger. "I'm good only to you." But he went on, with thoughtful simplicity, "You're right. I'm good to them all, only I don't show it. It's no good showing it to people, or you'll have them on your neck. Kind people are swarmed and trampled over like a piece of dry ground in a swamp. Fetch me some beer."

Having drained the bottle, he sucked his moustache and remarked, "There's a lot I could teach you if you were a bit older. There are things I could pass on to a man. I'm no fool. But you keep on reading. In books you'll come upon everything you need. Books aren't trash. Have some beer."

"I don't care for it."

"Good for you. Good, your keeping off it. Drinking is a calamity. The devil's behind vodka. If I had the money I'd get you to study. An uneducated man is an ox, only good under a yoke, or for meat. The best he can do for himself is wag his tail."

The captain's wife lent him a volume of Gogol. I read the story, *The Terrible Vengeance* with delight, but Smoury angrily dismissed it as "Trash! Just a fairy tale! I know them! There are better books."

Taking the book from me, he got another from the captain's, and gruffly ordered me, "Read Taras⁸—what-you-may-call-it. Go get it. It's good, she says; good for whom? For her, maybe; but maybe not for me? She bobs her hair; pity her ears aren't bobbed, too!"

When Taras challenged Ostap, the chef laughed aloud. "That's it! Certainly! You have learning, but I have strength! What do they say to that? Camels!"

He listened, absorbed, but with grumbling interjections. "Nonsense! Cutting a man in half from his shoulders to his hips; can't be done. Nor can you thrust a lance upward; it would break off. I've soldiered, myself."

Andrew's treachery disgusted him. "A low creature! Like a woman. Pugh!"

⁸ Gogol's novel about the Cossacks, *Taras Bulba*.

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But when Taras killed his son the chef got half out of his hammock, bent over and wept. The tears splashed from his cheek to the floor as he snorted, "O my God, my God!" And he stormed at me, "Read on, you rib of the devil!"

But it brought on an even more violent fit of weeping when I read Ostap's dying cry, "Do you hear, father?"

"Ruined, completely ruined," exclaimed Smoury. "Is that how it ends? Ekh! A bad business, that! Taras, now that was a man! Don't you think? Yes sir, a man all right!"

He took the book from me, and handled it with deference, his tears dripping on the binding. "A fine book; that was a treat!"

Ivanhoe followed. Smoury approved of Richard Plantagenet. "A real king!" he said, with conviction.

I had found the book dry. As a matter of fact, our tastes differed. I enjoyed *The Story of Thomas Jones*, an old version of Fielding's *History of Tom Jones, Foundling*, but Smoury snorted, "Trash! Your Thomas means nothing to me. What good is he to me? Let's have some other books."

I told him, once, there were other books, banned books, that could be read only secretly, at night in cellars. His eyes came wide open. "What? What are you lying for?"

"I'm not lying. When I went to confession the priest asked me about them; and I, myself, saw people reading them and the books made them cry."

The chef gave me a hard look. "Who cried?"

"The lady who was listening; and the other one was so scared, she ran out of the room."

"You must have dreamed it," said Smoury, passing his hand over his eyes; then, after a pause, he muttered, "But there must be things I haven't seen. I'm not that old, and for a man of my sort—so, whatever it was—"

And for a whole hour he talked, and with real eloquence.

Without noticing how, I got the reading habit and found it a pleasure to pick up a book. What I read was such a pleasant change from a life which I was finding increasingly burdensome.

Smoury, too, found recreation in it, and often summoned me from my work. "Come, read, Peshkov."

"I've still got some dishes to do."

"Let Max do it."

Brusquely he bade the assistant to do my work and, in retaliation, Max broke glasses. On the quiet the steward warned me, "I'll have to get you off the boat."

Once Max purposely left glasses in a bowl of slop water; and when I threw the water overboard the glasses sailed with it. "It's my fault," said the head steward, "charge it to me."

I got nasty looks from the other dining room workers and nasty remarks, such as, "What were you hired for, book-worm?"

And they did their best to pile up work for me, deliberately dirtying dishes for me to wash. I had forebodings that I was in for a bad ending, and so it turned out.

One evening, in an alcove in the boat, there sat two women, the older one red-faced and blowsy, the younger one, a girl in a new rose-colored jacket and a yellow dress. Both were tipsy. The older woman smiled and bowed to everybody, and when she spoke she accented her "O's" like a deacon. "Pardon me, friends. I've had a drop too much. But I've been in court, and been acquitted, so I've been celebrating."

The girl also laughed, and stared with filmed-over eyes at the other passengers. She nudged the other woman and said, "Ah, we know you, you nuisance!"

They had berths in second-class, opposite the cabin occupied by Jake and Serge. When the older woman went off, Serge took her place beside the girl, his froglike mouth distended lasciviously.

That night, my work finished, I stretched out on the table for some sleep when Serge came in, grabbed my arm and said, "Come, we're marrying you off."

He was drunk. When I tried to free my arm, he hit me. "Come on!"

Max came in, drunk too, and they dragged me over the deck, past sleeping passengers, to their cabin. But there stood Smoury, and in the doorway, holding the door, stood Jake. The girl kept digging her elbow in his back and crying drunkenly, "Let me go!"

Smoury delivered me from Serge and Max, took them by

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the hair, cracked their skulls together, and left them where they fell.

"Asiatic!" he roared at Jake, and slammed the door on him. To me, as he pushed me ahead of him, he growled, "Out of here!"

I went off to the stern. It was a cloudy night, and the river was black. In the boat's wake, two seething furrows of gray water curled toward the unseen shore. Between them the barge dragged on. Now to the right, now to the left, swung blobs of red light that illuminated nothing. A sudden bend of the shore blotted them out and everything became darker and more awesome.

The chef came up and took a seat beside me. "So they tried to force you on that creature? Ahh, the filthy beasts. I heard them!"

"Did you get her away from them?"

"Her?" After he had vilified her, he went on, moodily, "Everything's muck on this boat. Worse than a village. Ever live in a village?"

"No."

"In a village it's all misery—in the winter most of all."

He threw his cigarette overboard, mused, then resumed, "You've landed among a pack of swine; I'm sorry for you, kid. For them, too. Don't know what I'd have done another time. Maybe dropped on my knees and prayed, 'What's got into you, you sons of bitches? What are you at, you blind ones! Camels!'"

The steamer's whistle lengthily wailed, the towline plopped into the water, lantern lights bobbed up and down, guiding us into the harbor. More lights glowed out of the darkness.

"Piany Bor⁹—Drunk!" muttered the chef. "And there's a river named Pianaya; and I knew a captain named Pienkov and a clerk named Zapivokhin and another captain called Nepeipivo. I'm going ashore."

The strapping Kamska girls hauled furnace wood from the shore on long skids. Stooped under their harness, they

⁹The name of a pine forest. The word *piany* resembles the word for drunk, and the other names in the paragraph are related to the root word for drunk. *Nepeipivo* is close to the words meaning "don't drink beer."

trotted up in teams of two, and pitched their loads into the black stoke hold crying, "Wood!"

As they unloaded the wood, the sailors plucked at their breasts or legs and the women screeched, spat, and used their straps to parry slaps and pinches. I must have seen this a hundred times, the same thing everywhere the steamer stopped for fuel.

I felt as though I had grown old on that boat, lived on it for years, and could foretell what would happen a week from now, at the end of summer, by the end of next year.

Day had come. The outlines of a pine forest on a sandy butte above the harbor took shape. From the hills and the woods came laughter and singing from the women who trooped away like soldiers.

I had an impulse to weep; tears bubbled in my breast; my heart ran over with them; it was a pain to repress them, but a disgrace to be seen shedding them; and I went to give a hand to the sailor Bliakhin, who was washing the deck.

Bliakhin looked no-account—withered and faded; and he helped on the impression by retiring into corners, from which his sharp eyes glowed. "My real name's not Bliakhin—my mother, you see, lived a disreputable life. I've got a sister; and she, too. Happened to be their fate. Fate, brother, anchors everybody down. You're heading somewhere? Well, you'll find out."

As he swabbed the deck, he said in a low voice, "See what trouble comes from women? There you are! Damp wood may smolder a long time, but then it catches. I don't take to that sort of thing; it don't appeal to me. Had I been born a woman, I'd have picked a deep pool and drowned myself. Then I'd be safe with Jesus and no harm to anybody. But as long as you live you risk the fire. Take it from me, eunuchs aren't fools. They're wise; they know a bit of magic. They put aside vanities and serve God in purity."

The captain's wife passed us, lifting her skirts as she stepped through the slop water. She was tall, buxom, and had a fresh, candid face. I had a strong desire to follow her, begging her out of a full heart, "Speak to me; speak to me!"

Slowly the ship backed away from the pier. Bliakhin crossed himself and whispered, "We're off!"

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Chapter Six

AT SARAPULIA MAX WAS PUT OFF THE SHIP. HE LEFT WITHOUT a word of farewell to anyone, and in a dignified manner. Behind him trotted the gay woman passenger, and behind her followed the girl, bedraggled and swollen-eyed. For a long time, Serge kneeled on the threshold of the captain's cabin, bumping his head on the door, kissing it, and crying out, "Forgive me! It was Max's fault, not mine!"

Sailors, stewards and some passengers as well, knew he was to blame, but they interceded for him, "Come on, forgive him!" The captain kicked him out with such force that he sent him sprawling. Nevertheless he forgave him, and Serge promptly rushed on deck, toting a tea-tray around among the passengers, looking into their eyes with a hang-dog expression.

Max was replaced by a soldier from Viatka, a gaunt man with a small head and brick-red eyes. He was sent to kill some chickens, killed two, but let the rest get away. The passengers chased them, but three hens flapped overboard; and the soldier sat on a stack of stovewood near the chicken coop, and wept.

"What's up, you fool?" asked Smoury, enraged. "Imagine a soldier crying!"

"I'm only in the Reserves," confided the soldier, and that finished him. In half an hour he had become the universal butt. People came up to him, stared at him, and asked, "Is this the one?"

At the beginning he took no notice and seemed not to hear their giggles. He kept mopping at his tears on a cuff of his old shirt, in such a way as to make him appear actually to be hiding them up his sleeve. Finally, he became aware of his audience and his brown eyes blazed wrathfully, and in the rapid Viatka dialect, he shouted, "What're you looking at? You should be torn to pieces!"

This only furnished more entertainment to the passengers, who snapped their fingers at him, pulled at his shirt and apron, heartlessly baiting him like a goat, till dinner. Then someone put a squeezed lemon on a wooden ladle and tied it to his back with his apron strings. With every movement the ladle wagged, provoking general laughter, while he scurried like a trapped mouse, having no notion of the cause of their mirth.

Smoury, behind him, sat silent, his face like a woman's. Feeling sorry for the soldier, I asked Smoury, "Can I tell him?"

He nodded, without a word.

When I explained to the soldier why he was being laughed at, he tore off the ladle, threw it on the floor, and stamped on it; then with both hands he grabbed me by the hair. As we wrestled, the overjoyed passengers formed a ring around us. Smoury broke through it, separated us, gave me a cuff, and took the soldier by the ear. Seeing the little man writhing in the chef's grip the passengers yelled, whistled, stamped and laughed to split their sides. "To the attack, soldier! Butt the chef in the belly!"

Their savage glee made me yearn to come at them with a wooden club, and knock them all on the head. Smoury let go of the soldier, and with his hands clasped behind him, turned on the passengers like a wild boar, his back up and his teeth bared. "To your cabins! March!"

Again the soldier lunged at me, but Smoury took him around in one hand and carried him to the hatchway, where he held him under a water pump, spinning his frail body around as if it were a puppet.

The sailors came running up, along with the boatswain and the mate. The passengers crowded back. Standing a head taller than the rest was the chief steward, mute as ever.

Sitting on a stack of firewood near the kitchen the soldier took off his boots and kept wringing his dry socks, while the water dripped from his matted hair—another joke to tickle the passengers.

"Never mind," said the soldier, "I'll kill that boy!"

Smoury took me by the shoulder and spoke to the mate, and the sailors dispersed the passengers. Then Smoury asked the soldier, "What's to be done with you?"

The latter said nothing; but he stared at me with delirious eyes, yet seemed to be under restraint.

"Calm yourself, you breed of the devil!" said Smoury.

"Not being the piper, you can't give the tune," said the soldier. This, I saw, confused the chef. His puffed-out cheeks collapsed; he spat, and led me away. I walked after him, feeling foolish and looking back at the soldier. In an uneasy tone Smoury said, "That's a wild one! What do you think?"

Serge ran up to us and said breathlessly, "He's going to kill himself!"

"Where is he?" cried Smoury, running.

The soldier stood before the steward's cabin brandishing a big knife. It was the one used both to chop off the heads of chickens and split sticks for the stove, which had blunted it and notched it like a saw. He was ringed around by the passengers, twittering at the little funny man with the dripping head. His snubnosed face skittered like jelly; his mouth had a weary sag; his lips twitched; and he howled at them, "Torturers! Torturers!"

I found something to stand up on and was able to see over the heads of the people into their giggling faces, and hear them call to each other, "Look! Look!"

As he pushed his crumpled shirt into his trousers, with a hand thin as a child's, a handsome man beside me said, "He's preparing to die, and he hitches up his trousers!"

This drew a big laugh. It was obvious they didn't consider it likely that he would actually commit suicide, nor did I; but Smoury took one glance, and butting people out of the way with his paunch, shouted, "Out of the way, fools!"

He called them fools, repeatedly. Approaching one group he said, "Go where you belong, fools!"

This sounded funny, yet was true; for all of them, from morning on, had been behaving like one common fool. Having scattered the passengers, he came to the soldier, held out his hand and said, "Let's have that knife!"

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"Who cares!" said the soldier, holding out the handle.

The chef handed me the knife and pushed the soldier into the cabin. "Lie down and sleep. What's bothering you, eh?"

Without a word the soldier settled down in a hammock.

"He'll fetch you something to eat and a drop of vodka. Do you take vodka?"

"A drop, sometimes."

"But watch out, don't touch him. It wasn't he made fun of you, understand? I want you to know it wasn't he."

"Why did they torture me?" the soldier asked.

Smoury paused before he replied heavily, "How do I know?"

Coming into the kitchen with me, he muttered, "It's a sad one they got their claws in this time, all right. Look at him! And there you are. My boy, a man can be driven out of his mind, that he can. They stick to him like leeches, and he's done for. There are people here like leeches—worse than leeches."

Bringing bread, meat and vodka to the soldier, I found him still in the hammock, swinging, and crying like a woman. Placing the food on the table I said, "Eat."

"Shut the door."

"Then it will be dark."

"Shut it or they'll be sneaking in."

I left him. It was hard for me to look at him. He aroused such pity as to embarrass me. Endlessly grandma had reiterated, "One must be compassionate toward people. We're all miserable. Life is hard for us all."

"Did you bring it to him?" asked the chef. "How is the soldier?"

"I feel sad about him."

"So, what's the trouble now, eh?"

"You can't help feeling sad about people."

Smoury took my arm and pulled me to him, and said, "Your pity is not misspent, but don't waste time chattering about it. When you don't know how to cook jam, you must learn." Then, giving me a push, he said, brusquely, "It's no place for you here. Have a smoke."

The behavior of the passengers depressed me. There was something indescribably unfeeling in their persecution of the soldier, in their gleeful laughter when Smoury pulled him by the ear. How could they get pleasure out of something so revolting and pitiful? What was it that gave them such pleasure?

There they were back under their awnings, sitting or lounging, having a drink, playing a hand of cards, chatting, or holding serious discussions, or taking in the scenery, as though it were not they who, an hour ago, had whistled and jeered. Now all were quiet and languid as ever. From morning to night they eddied over the deck like fluff in the wind or motes in the sun. In knots of ten they would saunter to the hatchway, cross themselves; they would disembark at the landings, while the same sort embarked, their backs stooped under the same sort of bags and boxes, and wearing the same sort of clothes.

For the constant shifting of passengers made no change in the life aboard, at all. The new arrivals spoke of the same things as those who had departed: land, work, God, women—and in identical phrases. "Our sufferings are ordained by the Lord; our part is to bear it patiently. There's nothing more we can do. It's fate."

It depressed and exasperated me to hear such phrases. I did not care to suffer dirt or any ill; I would not endure injustice or insult. I knew I had not earned maltreatment; nor had the soldier earned it. Perhaps he had wanted to amuse others.

Max, quiet and good-natured, had been fired; but spiteful Serge had been kept on. And why had people who had nearly driven a man insane allowed themselves to be so tamely herded by the shouting sailors, why had they so meekly borne abuse?

"Why are you lolling over the deck?" shouted the boatswain, rolling his handsome, but ill-natured, eyes. "If the boat dips, over you'll go, you devils!"

Placidly, the "devils" resorted to the other deck, only to be driven away again, like sheep. "Accursed ones!"

On hot nights, it was smothering under the metal sheeting which the sun had baked red hot; and the passengers swarmed

over the deck like beetles, lying where they had dropped. The sailors poked them up with marlinspikes, shouting, "No sprawling around here; back where you belong!"

Standing up, they would grope like sleepwalkers wherever they were being prodded. The sailors were of the same sort as themselves; their only difference was their uniform; yet they ordered the others around like cops. What most marked these people to me was their spiritless, timid, sad submission. It was frightful, then, to see the cruel, mindless spirit of mischief that had so little of real mirth in it, break through the meek shell. It seemed to me they had no idea where they were being carried, and it did not matter to them where they were disembarked. Wherever it was, they stayed ashore only briefly, re-embarking on our boat or taking another, starting their travels anew. They seemed all astray, to be without kin, to have become strangers on earth. And every last one of them was a witless craven.

It was past midnight, once, when something went wrong in the engines, and there was a detonation like a cannon shot. Immediately, steam, pouring from the boiler room and filtering through every crack, covered the whole deck. Someone, unseen, shouted, "Gavrilov, some red lead and felt wadding!"

My bed was on the wash table in the kitchen, which was near the boiler room, and the explosion and the jolt woke me. The deck was quiet. From the engines came a hot, bubbling whisper, and the tapping of a hammer. However, a minute or two later, the quiet gave way to a pandemonium, as the passengers began their howling.

Through the white mist which was already dissipating, came women with streaming hair, and untidy men with eyes rounded into fish stares, all rushing pell-mell, colliding into each other, staggering under bundles, valises, boxes, falling, jostling each other, invoking God and St. Nicholas. It was dreadful, yet diverting, and I followed them around to see what they would do next.

I was observing a panic for the first time in my life, yet it was immediately apparent to me that the passengers had taken needless alarm. The vessel had not slackened speed. The life belts were clearly within reach. There was a full moon

and plenty of light. But the deck passengers ran wild over the deck, to be joined, soon, by milling passengers from the lower decks. One man jumped overboard, to be followed by another and then a third. Two peasants and a monk, using heavy blocks of wood, pried loose a bench screwed to the deck. A large crate of chickens was pitched overboard. At the foot of the stairway leading to the captain's bridge, in the middle of the deck, a peasant knelt, kept bowing to the people swarming past him, yelping like a wolf, "I'm an Orthodox . . . sinner . . ."

A fat citizen, who had pulled on his trousers without bothering to put on his shirt, beat himself on the chest and yelled, "To the boats, you devils!"

The sailors grabbed them by their collars, cracked their skulls together and dropped them on the deck. Smoury waddled up ponderously, his overcoat thrown over his pajamas, and harangued them in an echoing voice, "Shame on all of you! What's all this fuss about? Have we stopped? Have we slowed down? There's the shore! The idiots who jumped overboard have been tossed lifebelts and are being fished out. You see? The two boats there!" And, as he spoke, he strode among the third-class passengers, knocking them on the head with his fist; and they collapsed like sacks.

The commotion was not yet over when a lady, dressed in a cloak, lunged at Smoury, brandishing a spoon in his face, and cried, "What nerve!"

A damp gentleman sucked at his moustache and held her back, saying fretfully, "Idiot, let go of him!"

Smoury, waving his arms and blinking with embarrassment, asked me, "What's wrong, eh? What's she after me for? A nice thing! Never saw her in my life!"

A peasant with a bloody nose cried, "Call them human beings? Bandits!"

Before that summer ended, I had been through two such panics, both caused not by actual danger, but the dread of it. A third time two thieves, one in foreign dress, were caught by the passengers, who spent a solid hour mauling them, before the sailors found out and delivered the victims out of their hands; for which the passengers abused the sailors, crying,

"A case of thieves covering thieves, that's clear! You're scoundrels yourselves; that's why your sympathies are with the scoundrels."

Beaten into a coma, the thieves could not stand up when they were turned over to the authorities at the next stop.

There were other times when my feelings were thus agitated, and I could not decide whether people were good or evil, whether they preferred being at peace or making trouble; nor could I explain their cruelty, their impulse to hurt others, their diffidence when showing kindness.

I asked the chef, but he covered his face with a smoke cloud, and curtly dismissed it. "What's this chatter about? Humans are humans; some are clever and some are dopes. Stop talking and read. In books, the proper kind, I mean, you'll find the answers."

To please him, I bought him books as presents, picking up in Kazan for five kopecks, *The Tale of the Soldier Who Saved Peter the Great*. The chef happened to be drinking at the time, and in a surly mood, so I read it myself. I was captivated by it; it was short, simply written, easy to follow, interesting. I was sure it would give my teacher pleasure. But he crushed it into a ball in his hand and flung it overboard.

"There's your book, dope!" he said. "I train you up like a trick dog, and all you look for is trifling tales!" He stamped and raved. "What sort of book to hand me! Am I the kind that reads nonsense? Is it true what's written there! Answer me!"

"I don't know."

"But I know! If a man's head were off, the trunk would fall down the stairs; and the other fellow wouldn't have climbed up the haystacks. Soldiers aren't dopes. He would have set the place on fire, and finished them off that way—understand?"

"Yes."

"That's it. I know all about Tsar Peter and nothing like that happened to him. Get along with you."

Though I realized the chef was right I had enjoyed the book; so I bought another copy and reread it. I was astonished to discover that it was actually a poor book. This puzzled me, but increased my respect for the chef. Meanwhile he became

more irascible, and reiterated, "How much you have to learn! It's no place for you, here."

I, too, considered it no place for me. I was distressed by Serge's rotten treatment of me. More than once I saw him stealing tea things and sneaking them to passengers. I knew this was the theft Smoury had frequently cautioned me against. "Watch out. Don't let the staff have any of the cups or plates from your table."

This added to my burden, and but for Smoury I would have jumped ship and gone off into the woods. His affection for me grew every day; and besides, the boat fascinated me by its continuous movement. I grudged our stopovers; and I was ever anticipating something new, a voyage on the Kama River, the Bielaya River, and the Viatka, and then back up the Volga to see new sights, cities, people. But that was not to be. My career on the steamer was abruptly cut off. One evening, on the way to Kazan from Nizhny, I was summoned to the steward. Shutting the door behind me, he said to Smoury, who glowered from his seat on a stool, "There he is!"

Smoury gruffly asked me, "Did you give Serge any cups and plates?"

"He takes them behind my back."

Quietly the steward remarked, "He doesn't see it, yet he knows."

Smoury slapped his knee, then scratched it and said, "Hold on!"

Pondering, I looked at the steward, who returned the glance from glasses behind which there seemed to be no eyes. The man lived soundlessly. His movements were quiet; his voice was low. You would get just a glance of his colorless beard or his vacant eyes around a corner, and he would be gone. Before he went to sleep, he spent a long time on his knees in the buffet, under the icon and its lamp. The door was slightly ajar, and seen through the crack, he appeared like a black bundle. How he prayed I never found out; all he seemed to do was to stay on his knees, keep his eyes turned up to the icon, tug his beard and sigh.

Smoury broke the silence. "Ever get any money from Serge?"

"No."

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"Never?"

"Never."

"He never lies," Smoury told the steward, who replied in his lifeless voice. "That makes no difference. Please—"

"Come," said the cook, and, back at my table, he tapped his fingers on my head. "Fool; and fool that I am, too. I should have taken care."

I was discharged by the steward at Nizhny. I received close to eight rubles, my first big earnings. In his farewell to me, Smoury said gruffly, "Well, that's that. Eyes open from now on, understand? Don't go around with your mouth hanging open." He took my hand and put in it a beaded tobacco pouch. "For you. It's good handiwork. Made for me by my godchild. Good-by, then. Read; there's nothing better you can do."

He lifted me under the arms, kissed me and set me down on the dock. I felt sorry for him and myself. I could hardly keep the tears back, when I saw him going off to the steamer, jostling the stevedores aside, so big, heavy and lonely. Often, since then, have I run across his kind—good-hearted solitaires, cut off from the lives of others.

Chapter Seven

GRANDPA AND GRANDMA HAD MOVED BACK TO TOWN. I WENT there, working up an aggressive mood; but I was heavy-hearted. Why had I been thought a thief?

Grandma's greeting was tender, and she immediately started the samovar. In his mocking way grandpa asked, "Save any money?"

"What I saved is mine," I replied, and took a seat at the window. With an air I took out a pack of cigarettes and lit up.

"So!" said grandpa, glowering at me. "It's come to that, tasting the devil's poison! Aren't you a bit hasty?"

"I've even been given a tobacco pouch," I bragged.

"A tobacco pouch!" squealed grandpa. "Are you trying to rile me?"

He lunged at me, his strong, lean hands outstretched, his green eyes blazing. I met him head on, butting him in the stomach. The old man set on the floor, and for some tense moments, stared at me, blinking with astonishment, his mouth gaping. Then he said in a low voice, "Your own grandfather you knock down? Your mother's father?"

"You've knocked me down plenty in the past," I mumbled, not realizing how abominably I had behaved.

Dry and light, grandpa bounced up, sat beside me, flicked the cigarette out of my mouth, flung it out of the window, and said apprehensively, "You lunatic! Don't you realize God will repay you for this all your life? Mother," he turned to grandma, "did you see? He knocked me down, he knocked me down! Ask him!"

Without waiting or asking, she just reached for me, grabbed me by the hair, and slapped me, "For that, take this and this!"

I felt not pain, but humiliation, especially from grandpa's

giggling. He hopped on a chair, smacked his thighs, and chirped through his laughter, "That's the way; that's the way!"

I wrenched loose and ran to the shed, where I lay in a corner, forlorn and miserable, listening to the purring samovar.

Then grandma came in, bent over, and in a just audible whisper, told me, "You have to forgive me; I took care not to hurt you. I had to do it, for grandpa's an old, old man. He has to be indulged. He's fractured some small bones, and in addition his heart's eaten up with grief. Avoid doing him any injury. You're no longer a little boy, remember that, Alex. Now, he's the child."

Her words soothed like warm water. That loving whisper made me feel ashamed, but light-hearted, too. I embraced her.

"Go to him; go. It's all right, only don't smoke in front of him for a while. Give him a chance to get used to it."

I went back to the room, and after a look at grandpa, I could hardly keep back my laughter. His satisfaction was actually like a child's. His face was blissful; he was sitting at the table, crossing and uncrossing his legs, and running his claws through his reddish hair.

"Come back to butt me, goat? Ekh, you bandit! The image of your father! Freemason! Comes home, doesn't cross himself, and starts smoking on the spot! Ekh, you Bonaparte, you kopeck's worth of stuff!"

I said nothing, and let him exhaust his stock of abuse; fatigue silenced him. But at tea he began lecturing, "The fear of God is essential to men like reins to the horse. God is our only friend; man is a bitter enemy to man." Man's hostility to me I knew to be the truth; but the rest had no interest for me.

"You can return to Aunt Matrena now, and in the spring go back on a steamer. Spend the winter with them; they don't have to know you'll be quitting in the spring."

"Why should he be deceiving people?" said grandma, who had, herself, just deceived him with her pretense of beating me.

"There's no living without deceit," asserted grandpa. "Can you name anybody who lives without deceiving somebody?"

At nightfall, while grandpa was at his prayers, grandma and I went out through the gate, into the fields. The hut with

the two windows where grandpa lived was at the edge of the town, behind Kanatnoi Street, where he had once owned his house.

"And here we are, back again," said grandma with a laugh. "The old man can't find a place to rest his soul; he's always on the move. He's not contented here, either, but it suits me."

Ahead of us stretched some two miles of stubby growth, cut up by ditches and bordered by woods, and the row of birches lining the highway to Kazan. From the ditches protruded bush tips, which the beams of a chill, setting sun reddened like bloody fingers. A mild evening breeze ruffled the dusty grass. From a nearby path, silhouetted and erect like grass blades, too, we saw the shapes of city lads and their girls. In the right distance rose the red walls of the Old Believers¹⁰ cemetery, termed "The Bugrovsky Hermitage." On the left, beyond the raised road over the marshes, stood a dark clump of trees hedging the Jewish cemetery. There was something impoverished about it all, and everything seemed to cling to the wounded earth. The hovels on the edge of the town seemed to peer timidly out of their windows on the dusty road, on which scrawny, famished chickens sauntered. Toward the Dievichia monastery ambled a string of lowing cows. From the military post came band music, the brasses braying. A drunk stumbled along, holding an accordion in a combative attitude, and mumbling, "I'm on my way to thee, faithfully."

"Dope," said grandma, blinking in the red glare of the setting sun, "Where are you off to? You'll lose the accordion with which you console yourself."

As I looked around I described the life on the steamer. After it this was drab; it made me feel like a fish out of water. Grandma listened attentively as I used to listen to her. When I described Smoury she said, crossing herself, "That's a good man; take care of him, Mother of God, he's good!" And to me, "See that you don't forget him. Keep the good in mind and forget the bad."

It was a struggle for me to tell her why I had been dis-

¹⁰ A sect that followed an older ritual of the Orthodox Church, instead of the ritual revised during the reign of Tsar Alexis.

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charged, but I got the courage to tell her. It did not disturb her at all. She said, calmly, "You're still young; you haven't learned how to live."

"That's what everybody tells the other, 'You haven't learned how to live'—the peasants, the sailors, Aunt Matrena to her son. Where do you learn?"

She pursed her lips and shrugged, "I, myself, don't know." "But you say it like all the rest."

"And why shouldn't I?" grandma calmly replied. "You mustn't take offense. You're young; you're not called upon to know. And who does, when it comes down to it? Only scoundrels. There's grandpa, educated and sharp as he is, and he don't know."

"And you, have you lived well?"

"I, yes. And badly, too. Both ways."

People loitered past, their long shadows trailing after them, to be obliterated by the dust that rose from their steps like puffs of smoke. The evening melancholy became more cramping. From the window streamed grandpa's mutterings, "Lord, let me not be judged in Thy anger, nor punished with Thy wrath."

Grandma smiled. "He's tired God out. Every night his tale of woe and what about? He's old, he doesn't need anything; but he's always complaining and working himself into a lather over this or that. I imagine God has a laugh in the evening, hearing his voice. 'There's Basil Kashirin, at it again! Get to bed, now.'

I decided to deal in songbirds for a living—a pleasant livelihood, I thought it. I to catch them, and grandma to sell them. I purchased a net, a trap and a hoop, and constructed a cage. At dawn I posted myself in a clump of bushes in a ravine, while grandma, with sack and basket, went to glean the last mushrooms, nuts and bulbs in the woods.

The weary September sun was just on the rise. Now a cloud snuffed out its wan rays; now they settled over me like a veil of silver stuff. In the pit of the ravine it was still dim with a white mist rising. It had dark, raw, clayey edges, with the further side overgrown with grass and scrub, and covered with

fallen leaves; red, gold and brown, which a freshening breeze whipped along the gully.

The goldfinch sang among the turnip-tops. In the dusty, tattered grass I saw birds with animated, red-bonneted heads. Inquisitive titmouses noisily fussed above me, their white cheeks ludicrously puffed out, like the Sunday gallants on Kunavin Street. Quick, bright and saucy, they had to know and touch everything, and, one after another, they landed in the trap. It wrung my heart to see them flapping their wings; but it was strictly business with me. I transferred them into a spare cage, which I put in a sack, where the darkness quieted them down.

A flock of finches took up perches on a hawthorn enveloped in sunlight. The finches, in enjoyment of the sun, warbled joyously, and frolicked like schoolboys. The tame black and white magpie, thirsty and late for his voyage to warmer climes, clung to a swaying sweetbriar branch, grooming his wing feathers, while his black eyes measured his prey. The soaring lark returned with a bee, which he carefully stowed away in a burr, and hopped to the ground, with his thievish head cocked. The dreamed-of prize—if I could only net him—the hawfinch, who can be taught to talk, flitted soundlessly by. A bullfinch, chased from his flock, perched in an alder where, red and pompous as a general, his black bill shook with his wrathful chirping.

As the sun mounted, more and more birds turned up, and their singing grew livelier. The ravine, itself, hummed with autumn music, a muted, melancholy, sweet sound that could be felt through the unceasing, windy rustle of the bushes, and the rapturous bird song. In it I heard summer's farewell serenade, with whispered words meant only for my ears; and these words spontaneously grouped themselves into a song. As spontaneously, at the same time, my memory repictured scenes of the past.

Somewhere above me, I heard grandma calling, "Where are you?" She was sitting on the edge of the path. On a handkerchief was laid out bread, cucumbers, turnips and apples; and, in the center of this spread stood an exquisite little cut-glass decanter, with a crystal Napoleon head for its stopper, containing a portion of vodka, brewed from herbs. "Oh, Lord, but it's good!" exclaimed grandma, in a grateful voice.

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"I made up a song," I told her.

"Yes? Let's hear it."

I recited something I thought was a poem, which began:

"Many are the signs of approaching winter; farewell
to thee, oh sun of summer."

She broke in and wouldn't hear it out. "I know a song like that, and it's better." And, in a sing-song, she recited:

"Ah, gone is the summer sun into dark night behind woods far off. I am left behind, a maid and solitary, reft of the bliss of spring. In the morning I retrace the walks I took in May. Sad are the bare fields where I lost my youth. From my white breast pluck my heart and under the snow, bury it."

Though I suffered as a slighted author, I took delight in the song and pitied the girl. "That," said grandma, "is how grief sings. It was made up, you know, by a young girl. There were those walks in the springtime, but by wintertime her lover had thrown her over, for another girl, I suppose. Her heart ached, and she wept. Unless you've lived through it, yourself, you can't speak truly or well. See what a good song she made up."

The first time she sold a bird, getting forty kopecks for it, she was taken by surprise. "What do you think of that? And I thought it was foolishness, just a boy's sport! And this is how it turns out."

"You let it go too cheap."

"Is that so?"

On market days she got a ruble per bird, and was truly startled. What profitable sport! "Women wash clothes or scrub floors for days to earn a quarter of a ruble, and all you do is catch a bird! But, you know, it's not a nice thing to do, caging birds. That's enough of it, Alex."

But I got pleasure out of trapping birds. It brought me independence without trouble to anyone except the birds. I secured good equipment and learned much from old bird trappers. I covered as much as two miles, by myself, hunting

birds, to the forest that lined the Volga in whose pines the crossbills, valued by collectors, lived and bred, and the Apollyon titmouse, a rare and beautiful white bird with a long tail.

I would set out at dusk, and spend all night ranging the highroad to Kazan; sometimes I hunted through the fall rains, slogging through the mire. Over my shoulder, in an oilskin sack, were my cages baited with food; in my hand a thick walnut stick. The autumn night was chill and dismaying. One would pass under birches mutilated by lightning; and dripping branches scraped my head. Below, to the left, over the black flood of the Volga, swayed solitary lights on the masts of steamers and barges, looking lost in a measureless abyss, while the wheels splashed and the sirens moaned.

From the hardened earth along the roadside jutted the village hovels. Snarling, famished dogs circled my legs; watchmen stumbled into me and chattered in fright, "Who's that? Only the devil brings people out at this hour."

Fearing lest my gear be confiscated, I kept five-kopeck pieces in my pocket to bribe the watchman. The one in the village of Fokinoi became my friend, and was always lamenting, "What, again! What a rash, restless night-bird you are!"

His name was Nifron, a little, gray man who looked like a saint. From his blouse he took a turnip, an apple, and some peas and gave them to me. "There, my friend, a present for you. Eat it with enjoyment." Escorting me to the village limits, his sendoff was, "Go, and God be with you!"

I reached the forest before dawn, set my traps, and lay down on my coat at the forest edge, waiting for daybreak. Heavy autumn sleep enfolded the earth, and everything was still. The broad meadows bordering the forest were barely visible through the gray mist. Divided by the Volga, the fields met and separated again, until they dissolved in fog. Unhurriedly the bright sun came up above the meadows. Lights spangled the dark mane of the forest and a strange, poignant pulsation began in my heart. Ever more swiftly swirled the fog off the meadows, silvering in the sunlight, and then bushes, trees, haystacks began to take form. Sunlight flooded the meadows, looking like streams of gold along the riversides. The sun, by a mere look into the still water under the bank, made the whole

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river seem to rise up toward it, as it mounted the sky and blessed the bare, chilled earth with warmth and joy and drew from it sweet autumn fragrances. In the air's transparency, earth looked limitlessly vast. Everything seemed to be afloat in space, beckoning one toward the world's farthest reaches. I saw ten such sunrises that fall, and with each a new world, a new beauty took shape under my eyes.

I so loved the sun that I took delight in its very name, whose sweet sound¹¹ seemed to reverberate like a bell.

I used to put my hands on it when a beam pierced, like a sword, through branches, or through a crack in the fence. Grandpa had repeatedly read to me the story of Prince Michael Chernigovsky¹² and Lady Théodora, who refused to worship the sun, and I pictured them as a gypsy pair, swarthy, sullen and ill-natured, with infected eyes like the poor Mordvins. A spontaneous smile came to my face with every sunrise over the meadows.

The pine forest murmured above me as, with green paws, it brushed off dew. Like silver brocade on fern leaves and on shadowed ground, gleamed the morning hoar-frost. Rain had beaten down the russet grass; stiff blades were bowed to the ground; yet, when the sun's rays touched them, a tremor seemed to run through them, stirring them to, perhaps, their last effort.

The birds rose. They rebounded from bough to bough, like balls of gray fluff. With their hooked beaks flamboyant cross-bills pecked at pine cones in the top branches. Perched on the tip of pine branch, a white Apollyon titmouse sang, wielded its long tail, like a rudder, and cast a wary glance from its jet-bead eye at my net. And, all of a sudden, the entire forest, solemnly brooding a moment ago, echoed with thousands of bird voices, with the animation of earth's purest living creatures. In their image have fairies, cherubs, seraphs and all the angels been created by man, father of earthly beauty, to console himself.

I felt some pangs in trapping the little singers; I regretted

¹¹ The Russian word for sun is *solntse*, with the *l* almost silent.

¹² *Cherni* means black.

shutting them up in cages. I would have preferred the mere pleasure of looking at them. But the craving of the hunter and the need of money stifled these feelings.

The birds tantalized me with their shrewdness. After a cautious inspection of the trap, the blue titmouse understood what threatened, and helped herself to seed between the rungs of the trap, by pecking them from the side and thus avoiding risks. But inquisitiveness was the undoing of the titmouse. And I got whole flocks of puffed-up, but doltish, bullfinches, who ambled into the nets like fat burghers into church. On finding themselves trapped they looked amazed, rolled their eyes, and went for my fingers with their strong beaks. The crossbill came into the trap with a grave air. Unlike the rest this witless, avaricious bird contemplated the net a long time, propped back upon its long tail, with its pointed beak stuck out. He can run up a tree trunk like a woodpecker, always acting as the escort of a titmouse. There is something disagreeable about this smoke-hued songbird. It shows no love and receives none. It resembles the magpie in the way it is tempted by bright objects which it steals and hides away.

My catch was completed before noon, and I returned by way of the forest. Had I taken the road, boys and young men from the village would have waylaid me, stripped me of my cages and destroyed my gear, something I had already experienced.

I got home at dusk, tired and hungry, but with a sense of having grown that day, of having added to my knowledge and my strength. This enabled me to bear grandpa's jibes without feeling affronted, whereupon he began to reason with me.

"Quit this pointless business. Finish with it. No one ever made his mark through birding. I've never known it to happen. Hunt out another job where your wits can develop. Man isn't given life without purpose. He's God's grain and he must produce a full ear. He's like a ruble; well invested it brings in three rubles. You think life is play? No, it's not play. The world man inhabits is a darkness, and every man must light his own way through it. Everybody gets enough to fill his ten fingers, but greedily grasps for more handfuls. Be strong; but if you're weak, be crafty. The strengthless man dangles be-

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tween heaven and hell. Live so that people feel you're with them, but always realize that you're alone. Trust nobody, whatever the situation may be. You'll never make a straight measure if you follow onl yyour eye. Guard our tongue. No city, no house was constructed by the tongue; but the axe has carved out rubles. You're not a fool and you're not a Kalmuck,¹³ whom wealth bothers like vermin on their sheep."

He could go on like this through the night, and I knew the phrases by heart. They interested me, but I was dubious about their sense. According to them, there were two obstacles to man's fulfillment of his desires—his God and his fellowmen.

Seated at the window, grandma worked with her lace thread; the spindle whirring in her able hands. After silently listening to grandpa's long homily, she broke in, "The smile of the Mother of God, that's what everything hangs on."

"What!" gulped grandpa. "God! I have God always in mind. I know everything about God's part. Ekh, you old fool! Did God plant fools on earth, eh?"

As I saw it, Cossacks and soldiers led the most joyful life of all—cheerful and carefree. Early on clear mornings, they were out in the valley near the house. Dispersed over the bare fields, which they dotted like white mushrooms, they started up a tricky and absorbing game. Husky and lively in their white blouses, they charged over the fields with their guns at the ready, and vanished down the ravine; then, at a bugle call, they were suddenly all over the field again, shouting their "Hurrahs!" above the menacing roll of drums. With bayonets fixed, they sometimes charged our house, apparently about to sweep it up like a haystack. I shouted "Hurrah!" too, and charged with them, in an ecstasy of movement. Under the incitation of the drums I felt a passionate urge to demolish something, pull down a fence or strike another boy. In their rest periods the soldiers enraptured me by teaching me signals, or showing me the mechanism of their artillery. Now and then a soldier would prod my belly with his bayonet and cry, with pretended excitement, "Get the cockroach!"

¹³The Kalmucks were mainly nomadic herdsmen.

The bayonet glittered; it seemed to be alive, to coil like a snake about to strike. It was all rather scary, yet enjoyable.

The Mordvin drummer taught me to use the sticks. At first, manipulating my wrists, he would beat out the rhythm with my fingers, till they hurt; then he would place the sticks in my bruised fingers. "Strike it—one-two, one-two! Rum-ti-tum. Left-soft, right-loud, rum-ti," he bellowed, fixing me with his round, birdlike eyes.

I went through most of their drill with the soldiers, and when it was over, I escorted them through the streets, to their barracks, listening to their hearty singing, and peering up into their good-natured faces, all as fresh as newly-minted coins. The procession up the street of this jovial mass of men roused amiable feeling in me, made me wish to immerse myself into them as into a river or a forest. These men had no terrors; could overcome everything; could do anything they wished; and were all good, simple-hearted people.

One day, however, during a rest, a young corporal handed me a peculiarly thick cigarette. "Have a smoke! I wouldn't hand this out to everybody. Matter of fact, I shouldn't give one to you, they're so special!"

I lit up and he moved off a few paces. Suddenly a blinding red flame singed my fingers, my nose and eyebrows, and a corrosive smoke made me cough and retch. Blinded and in a panic, I stamped up and down, heartily amusing the soldiers who were ringed around me. I ran home, with pursuing whistles and laughter, and a sound like a snapping whip. My scorched fingers pained, my face smarted, tears ran down, but the pain did not hurt so much as my wondering, bleakly, why this could be fun to such nice chaps.

On reaching home, I secluded myself in the attic to brood over this unaccountable cruelty whose repulsive presence blocked my path. How sharp and actual was the image memory brought before me, large as life, of the skinny Sarapula soldier saying, "Now you understand?"

I also frequented Cossacks' barracks near Pechersky Square. They differed from our soldiers, not only in being such good horsemen and wearing handsomer uniforms, but in their dia-

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lect, their songs, and their accomplished dancers. At dusk, after tending to their horses, they made a ring near the stables, and a little Cossack, wagging his tufts of red hair, began singing in a soft, high voice that had the timbre of a trumpet. In the prolonged, melancholy notes flowed the Don and the blue Doonia.¹⁴ His eyes were shut, like those of a linnet, which has been known to sing till it drops, dead, from its perch. His shirt collar was open, baring a collar bone that gleamed like a copper band. There was something metallic, coppery, about all of him. Teetering on his skinny legs, as if rocked by the earth under him, and his hands out, he seemed to be without other senses, to be all sound—a man no longer, but a horn of brass. Sometimes he appeared to me on the point of falling, about to drop prostrate and dead like the linnet, because all his spirit and vigor had been spent in his song.

Their hands in their pockets or held behind their stalwart backs, his mates surrounded him, their grave eyes fixed on his coppery face. Or, clapping their hands, and spitting to clear their throats, they joined in, reverently, like church choristers. The bearded and shaven, all looked like icons, dignified, a race apart. The song stretched like a long street, level and wide. Listening to him, everything left my mind, the hour of the day, or whether I was man or boy. Nothing else existed. Then the voice of the singer died away. The horses were heard in long neighs, full of longing for their steppes; and, imperceptibly, but surely, the autumn night drifted up from the fields. My swelling heart almost split under pressure of many strange emotions, and I felt an encompassing, inarticulate love for all human beings and all the earth.

The coppery little Cossack seemed to be superhuman, a man of legend living in realms beyond ordinary folk. In his presence I became tongue-tied. When he asked me something, I was lost in bashful silence, and responded only with a blissful smile. I would have followed at his beck in humble, dog-like silence. All I asked for was to see as much of him as I could, and hear him sing.

¹⁴ Rivers of the Cossack regions in the south of Russia.

Chapter Eight

WITH THE FIRST SNOWFALL, GRANDPA TOOK ME BACK TO grandma's sister. "It won't hurt you," he said.

With my wonderful summer experiences behind me, I felt older and wiser, and that household seemed drearier than ever. They still poisoned themselves in their gluttony and fell sick and expatiated minutely on their ailments to each other. The old woman continued her bloodthirsty prayers to God. The boss' wife had slimmed down, but her movements were as sedate and heavy as when she was pregnant. Fussing with baby clothes, she hummed one tune: "Spiria, Spiria, Spiridon, little brother Spiria, I sit inside the sled and Spiria sits on the floorboard."

At any interruption, she would stop and ask irritably, "What do you want?" I believe she knew no other song.

Evenings I was called into the sitting room and commanded, "Tell us, now, what happened on the boat?"

Sitting near the door, I told my story. It was a pleasure to me to call up a different life from this, into which necessity had forced me. I became so absorbed, my audience was forgotten; but it soon made itself heard.

Never having been aboard a ship, the women wanted to know, "Wasn't it dangerous?" I couldn't understand; what danger was there?

"The boat could sink any minute; then everybody would drown."

The boss laughed at them, but I could not convince the women that ships did not sink in deep water. According to the old woman, the ship did not float on the water, but made its way on wheels over the riverbed, like a wagon on land.

"If they're iron, how do they float? An axe doesn't float; no chance of that!"

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"But a metal cup floats."

"How can you compare them? A cup's too small to count."

My description of Smoury and his books evoked contempt. Only heretics and the witless wrote books, according to the old woman.

"How about King David and his Book of Psalms?"

"The Psalms are scriptures; besides, King David asked God's forgiveness for writing them."

"Where does it say that?"

"On the palms of my hands, that's where! My hand on your neck will show you where!"

She was the know-it-all. She had positive—and barbarous—opinions on every subject. "A Tatar died on the Pechora River and his soul was coal black when it came out of his mouth!"

"Soul or spirit?" I asked; and she said, contemptuously, "Of a Tatar, idiot!"

The boss' wife also distrusted books. "They do a lot of harm," she said, "especially to the young. At Grebeshka, where I lived, there was a girl, came of a good family too, and she read all the time; and what happened? She fell in love with a deacon, whose wife shamed her right in the street, before all the people; it was awful!"

At times I used phrases recalled from Smoury's books. For example, in one of them, an interminable volume, there was a sentence reading, "Strictly speaking, no single inventor gave us gunpowder; as, in other cases, it climaxed a succession of observations and discoveries." I don't know why this had impressed me. I particularly fancied the combination of the two phrases, "strictly speaking, no single inventor gave us gunpowder," which seemed to me very effective. These phrases were to bring a farcical misery upon me.

Once, being called upon to entertain my employers with my maritime recollections, I replied, "Strictly speaking, I have nothing left to tell."

They never got over it. "What?" they cried. "What did you say?" And all four laughed and repeated to themselves, "Strictly speaking! Oh, my!"

The boss, himself, twitted me, "That was clumsily put, old man."

And for a long time after, I'd hear, "Hey, there, Strictly Speaking, come here and wipe up the baby's mess, Strictly Speaking!"

This oafish horseplay did not offend me so much as it surprised me. I lived in a daze of stupefying misery, and it was a struggle to survive it. I had no sense of incompetence at my work. There were two babies in the house, whose nurses never satisfied the mistresses, and were regularly being replaced. I had to tend the babies, wash their diapers daily, and once a week take the linen to rinse at the Spring of the Gendarmes. Here I met with the jibes of the washerwomen, "How come you're doing woman's work?"

Sometimes their baiting infuriated me to such a pitch that I struck at them with the damp twists of linen, for which I was well repaid in kind. Yet, I found the women jolly and entertaining.

The Spring of the Gendarmes flowed alongside the causeway over the swamp and into the Oka. The causeway separated the city from a field, which still bore the name of the ancient god, Yarilo. The people of the neighboring town of Semika had laid out part of the field as a sort of park. I heard from grandma that, when she was young, the people there had still sacrificed to Yarilo. They wrapped a wheel in tow and pitch, set it ablaze, and amidst shouts and songs, started it down the hill, watching if the burning wheel rolled into the Oka. In that case, it was believed Yarilo had received the sacrifice, and they could look for a sunny and fruitful summer.

The washerwomen came mostly from the Yarilo, tough, willful women who knew the world. I enjoyed their accounts of the merchants, *chinovniki*,¹⁵ and officers for whom they worked. Rinsing their wash in winter in the icy water was gruelling work. The hands of all of them were chapped. They toiled, stopped over the wooden trough that carried the stream, under an old, splintered shed, which kept out neither wind nor snow. Their faces were red with the pinching frost, which stiffened their wet fingers until they couldn't bend their knuck-

¹⁵ Government officials and clerks; the word generally carries a connotation of bureaucratic behavior.

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les, and made their eyes tear continually. Yet they chattered incessantly, exchanging stories, and faced everybody and everything with bravado.

The best story-teller among them was Natalie Kozlovsky, a woman about thirty, fresh-faced, strong, with laughing eyes and a sharp, agile tongue. Her admiring companions consulted her in their affairs and praised her skill and her neat dress, and commended her for sending her daughter to high school. When she came down the slippery hill footpath, bowed under her two baskets of wet linen, she got warm greetings from all, "And how's your daughter?"

"In good health, thank you, and learning well, thank God!"

"There you are; that girl will be a lady!"

"That's why I'm educating her. Where do the ladies all come from, rouged faces and all? From our own kind, from the dark earth. And where else? The one with the most knowledge has the longest reach and can grasp the most; and the one who grasps the most gets the rank and the honors. God puts us into the world ignorant children, and expects to get us back wise elders; this means we all have to learn."

When she spoke, the others listened, attentive to her self-assured, fluent phrases. The women talked her up, not only to her face but behind her back, marvelling at her intellect. Yet she had no imitators. She had sewn leather cuffs, made from the uppers of old boots, over her blouse sleeves, and this spared her baring her arms to the elbows, and kept her sleeves dry. Everyone applauded the device, but no one used it. When I did they jeered me: "Imagine, learning from a woman!"

About her daughter, she said, "It's an important step. It will add one more young lady to the world. Is that a small matter? Still, she may not be able to keep it up; she may die. And students don't have it easy. But there was the Bakhilovs' daughter. She studied and studied and got to be a teacher, and she was set for life."

"Of course, if they marry, they don't need the education; provided they're good for something else."

"A woman's cleverness isn't in her head."

I found it odd and embarrassing to hear them speak of such things without reticence. I had heard sailors, soldiers and

peasants on the subject of women. They always boasted of their craft in getting the best of women. I sensed a certain hostility in their attitude toward "females"; yet there was usually a hollow ring in their brag, which suggested that their tales were more invention than truth.

The washerwomen did not drool over "conquests"; but, in their comments upon men there were overtones of disdain and animosity that made me feel that women, in truth, might be the strong ones.

"Even those that don't gad about, the quiet ones, come to women!" said Natalie; and an old woman, in a snuffling voice, asked, "And where else? Even monks and hermits turn from God Himself, to us."

These talks, heard through the mournful gurgle of water and the smack of wet clothes on stone, or on grimy boards which not even the snow could cover clean, this brazenly prurient chatter about intimate things, about the life source from which all peoples spring, drove me into shocked diffidence; and it pulled my thoughts to the "romances" that simmered, irritatingly, all around me. My understanding of these "romances" drew upon smut I heard all around me.

Yet, I found the company of the washerwomen, or orderlies in kitchens, or laborers in cellars, far more exhilarating than what I had at home, where the stilted talk dwelt on the same inanities, where life was so drably routinized that I felt suffocated in constraint and resentful ennui. My employers lived as though bewitched, ringed by food, sickness and sleep, and the concern over the preparations for meals, and for bed. They were preoccupied by sin and death, of which they had a craven fear. They were in constant friction with each other, as grain kernels are in friction with the millstone that is pulverizing them.

When I had some time to myself I used to go to the shed to cut up firewood, and to enjoy being alone. But I seldom had that pleasure. I was sought here by the officers' orderlies, eager to spill the gossip of the yard. My most frequent visitors were Yermokhin and Sidorov. The former, who came from Kaluga, was tall, but stooped over; prominent, thick veins seamed his skin; and he had a little head with vacant eyes. He was slug-

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gish and stupid to an annoying degree, and slow and clumsy in movement. At sight of a woman his eyes fluttered, and he lurched forward as if about to prostrate himself at her feet. His rapid conquests of cooks and housemaids provoked astonishment and general envy. He elicited further respect for his bearish strength. Sidorov, who hailed from Tula, was a moody, soft-spoken man who stared into corners, except when he was telling an anecdote, in his low tones.

"What are you staring at?"

"I thought there was a mouse there. I love mice, the quiet way they run."

I wrote letters home for the orderlies, love letters, mostly. I enjoyed it, especially when writing for Sidorov. Regularly, every Saturday, he had me get off a letter to his sister in Tula. He called me into his kitchen, seated himself at my side at the table, rubbed his bristly, recently-shaven skull, and gave me low-voiced instructions straight in my ear.

"So, let's get going. The regular beginning, you know. 'Dearest sister, hoping this finds you in good health'—you know how it should go. And now write, 'The ruble you sent me came. Thank you for sending it, but it was not necessary. There's nothing I lack; we live very well.' . . . We don't, as a matter of fact; we live like dogs; but there's no point letting her know. She's young, only fourteen. Why should she be burdened? Now, go on by yourself, the way you've been told."

He crowded me, spurting his hot and odorous breath into my ear. "Write this: 'If anybody tries any soft talk on you, don't believe him. He wants to fool you; his game is to ruin you.' "

The strain of repressing a cough reddened his face, and brought tears in his eyes. He leaned on the table, and crowded me still more.

"You're in my way."

"Never mind, keep on writing! 'And especially gentlemen. Never trust a gentleman. They'll mislead a girl the first look. They know just what to tell her. If you have any money saved up, let a priest, who you know to be a decent man, hold it for you. But it would be still better to bury it; only make sure you remember where.' "

It was a trial trying to follow his whispering, which was often lost in the rattle of the tin vanes in the ventilator. Before me was the oven front, sooted over, and the dish closet black with flies. The foul kitchen stank acridly of charred grease, kerosene and smoke, and swarmed with vermin, cockroaches crawling on the oven and in and out of the firewood. A melancholy mood chilled my heart. Pity for the soldier and his sister almost brought me to tears. Could people live like that, could it be right for them to live like that?

I continued writing, ignoring Sidorov's whispers; I dealt with the misery and ugliness of life until, with a sigh, he said to me, "You've written her a lot. Now she'll know what she has to look out for."

"There's nothing she has to look out for!" I retorted, although there was so much I, myself, looked out for, in dread.

The soldier chuckled and cleared his throat. "You're an odd one! What do you mean, nothing to look out for? How about gentlemen and God? Don't you have to worry about them?"

On receiving a letter from his sister, he would hurry me, "Quick, please, read it to me." And he made me read the poor, trivial and insultingly hasty scrawl three times over.

Kind and good though he was by nature, he treated women like the rest, that is, brutally. These affairs as they came to my voluntary or involuntary notice—often they happened right under my nose—were astonishing and indecently abrupt in their beginnings and endings. I saw Sidorov excite sympathy in a woman over his soldier's life, then make her swoon with false avowals, and then describe hisfeat to Yermokhin, scowling and spitting in disgust, as if it had been a dose of salts. I observed all this with a sinking heart and, outraged, I demanded of the soldiers why they were so false in dealings with a woman, misleading her, then deriding her among themselves; why they exposed her and often treated her to a beating, besides.

One answered with a condescending laugh, "Such things are not for you to know. It's wrong and sinful, and you have a way to go before you get to that; you're too young to understand it."

But I once got a clearer answer which has stayed in my

mind. "Do you imagine," Sidorov said, "that the woman doesn't know I'm fooling? She knows, all right. She's looking to be fooled. In these games everybody cheats. It's a disgrace all around. It's not love for either; just a game. A miserable shame! The time will come, and you'll experience it, too. It got people chased out of paradise; it's the source of all unhappiness."

What he said was put so truly, yet so glumly and contritely, as to somewhat reconcile me to these "love affairs." It made me feel better disposed toward him than toward Yermokhin, whom I came to loathe, looking for occasions to annoy and ridicule him. This I managed so well as to have him frequently chasing me across the yard, intent on doing me an injury, and his clumsiness alone kept him from it.

"It's prohibited," Sidorov said of relations with women. That I knew, but that such relations were the source of man's miseries I rejected. Unhappy people I saw all around, but I could not accept his view of it, after seeing the inexpressible light in the eyes of lovers, and after having become aware of the inexpressible tenderness they felt for each other. The sight of this festival of the heart never failed to exhilarate me.

Nevertheless, as I recall it, that life grew steadily more dull and brutish, and more rutted in its ways. I could not even dream of any lightening of the dreariness that bleared my gaze.

One day I heard a story from the soldiers that affected me profoundly. There was a cutter, a mild-mannered foreigner, who worked for the most exclusive tailor in town. He was married to a dainty little childless woman, who spent the day reading books. Above the din of the yard, among drunken, roistering neighbors, these two lived, quite unseen and unheard. They never had visitors and never went out, except to theatres on holidays.

The husband was kept busy into the night. The wife, who gave the impression of an undeveloped girl, made a bi-weekly trip to the library. I used to see her, her books strapped around like a student, walking to the dike, limping as though she were a bit lame. Her little hands were gloved, and she seemed to me unaffected and gracious and fresh and neat. Her face was birdlike with its little, darting eyes; altogether she had

the prettiness of a porcelain figurine. The soldiers said it was missing ribs that gave that quaint sway to her walk; but it appealed to me, and she had a place in my esteem far above the yard's other ladies, the wives of the officers. For all their confident tones, their fancy wardrobes and their affections, they looked stale, like superfluous things long forgotten in a closet.

To the yard folk the cutter's dainty wife was a halfwit. Their theory was that books had addled her brain, and brought her to such a pass that housekeeping had got beyond her, obliging her husband to do the marketing and give instructions to the big, foreign woman who cooked and did for them. This woman was one-eyed, and that one always red and tearing; the other was just a pink slit. According to the yard folk, she had no more wits than her mistress, couldn't do a proper veal and onion fry; and had once mistaken radishes for parsley. How dreadful!

The three were as out of place there as if, accidentally, they had been cooped up with chickens. They made me think of a titmouse, seeking warmth, flying through the ventilator pane of a winter double window, and finding itself in the foul and smothering tenement of man.

And then I learned from the orderlies of the nasty and humiliating trick on the cutter's wife that was being played by the officers. Taking turns, they composed a letter to her daily, containing an avowal of love, tributes to her beauty, and lamentations over the supposed correspondent's misery. Each of her replies pleaded to her correspondent to be left in peace, regretted hurting him, and asked God to help him overcome his infatuation. He would read her reply to the rest; and then another love letter would be concocted, and dispatched to her under another signature.

As the orderlies told me this they laughed and jeered at the woman. "That hunchback's a miserable nitwit!" boomed Yermokhin, and in softer-voiced agreement, Sidorov remarked, "No matter what, a woman likes to be fooled with; she knows what's happening."

I didn't think the cutter's wife knew they were fooling, and I decided to enlighten her. Waiting till I saw her cook go down

in the cellar, I skipped up the dim staircase to the cutter's apartment, and made my way into the kitchen. No one was there, and I went on into the living room, where I saw the cutter's wife at the table. She had a large, gilt cup in one hand, and a book in the other. Startled, she caught the book to her bosom, and cried out in a faint voice, "Who's that? Auguste! Who are you?"

In confused, blurted phrases, I explained why I was there, looking for her book, at any moment, to be flung at my head. She was in a pale blue robe, fringed at the bottom, and with lace trimming on collar and sleeves; and she sat in a raspberry-tinted armchair; and her flaxen hair waved over her shoulders; and she appeared to me like one of heaven's angels. Leaning back in her chair, she first stared at me, with eyes rounded with anger, then bright with smiling astonishment.

My courage spent, I turned to the door, but she stopped me. "Wait a moment."

Putting her cup on the tray and laying the book down on the table, she said in a mature, full voice. "You're a funny lad. Come here."

I edged up to her shyly, and she took my hand and stroked it with her cool, dainty fingers. "Are you sure," she asked, "no one told you to come here with this? No? Very well. It's clearly your own idea."

Letting go of my hand, she said in a low, halting voice, "So that's how the soldiers feel about me."

"Move away from here," I urged her.

"Why?"

"They'll deceive you."

This drew a cheerful laugh from her. "Are you studying? Do you like books?" she asked me.

"I have no time for them."

"If you liked them, you'd make the time. Thank you." And she held a two-greven piece out to me, between her thumb and forefinger. I accepted that cold coin with reluctance, not daring to refuse it; but on my way down, I laid it on the post of the banister.

I brought away from that woman profound new perceptions. I felt myself in the dawn of a new time. For days I lived in

the elated memory of the cutter's wife in that spacious chamber, robed and like an angel in pale blue. Everything about her had a touch of exotic loveliness. I recalled the rug of dull gold under her feet. The winter light, through the silvery, frosted panes, seemed to take warmth from her presence. I longed for another sight of her and thought, Supposing I came to her to borrow a book?

I put the thought into action. Once again I saw her in the same room, and with a book in her hand; but her face was bound in a red kerchief and her eyes were swollen; and I could not make out her indistinct words, as she handed me a book bound in black. I left her sadly, with the book, which gave off a mingled tar and licorice odor. I secreted it in the attic, folded first in paper and then in a freshly laundered shirt, for fear of its being found and damaged by my employers.

They were subscribers to the magazine "Neva,"¹⁶ for the cut-out patterns and the prize offers; but they never read it. After a glance at the illustrations, they stored the copies in a bedroom cupboard, taking them out at the close of the year to the binder's, and then storing the bound volumes under the bed, where they had company with three previously bound volumes of "The Review of Painting." When I washed the room the slop water lapped around them. The boss also subscribed to "The Russian Courier," which he read, without pleasure, in the evening, muttering, "Why the hell do they publish such junk?"

On Saturday, packing away the linen in the attic, I unwrapped the book. Its first lines were, "Houses are like people; their faces are all their own." I was startled by this truth and I read on, standing at the gable window, until it got too cold. In the evening, when the rest were gone to vespers, I took the book into the kitchen and buried myself in the worn pages, yellow as autumn leaves. I was transported, in a glance, into a new life, where criteria were new, and the very names were new; I was shown exalted heroes and moody villains, utterly unlike the people I lived among.

¹⁶A popular magazine that took its name from the river that flows through Leningrad—then, St. Petersburg.

The book was a novel by Xavier de Montepin, lengthy, like all his novels, congested with action and characters living a strange and intense life. Here everything was remarkably clear and direct, as if good and evil were illuminated by a light glowing between the lines. It took over direction of one's emotions, involving one in the complicated destinies of its characters. I trembled with sudden urges to assist one and foil another, oblivious of the fact that this life suddenly opened to me, had only a paper reality. These absorbing conflicts shut every other thing out of my mind. I was in ecstasy on one page and in despair on the next.

I read on and on until the door bell rang. I knew immediately who was ringing and why. The candle had quite burned down, dripping wax all down the candlestick that I had polished that very morning. The lamp had gone out, through my neglecting to adjust the wick. I ran around the kitchen, seeking to cover up the evidence of my crimes. Slipping the book under the oven, I pottered about the lamp. The nurse-maid ran in, "Are you deaf? They're ringing."

I hurried to open the door. "Were you sleeping?" the boss asked, testily. Ascending the stairs with dragging steps, his wife whined that the exposure had given her a cold. The old woman scolded. Immediately noticing the burned-down candle, she demanded what I had been doing. Just hauled down from my heights, I was in a panic over their possible discovery of the book. There was danger of my setting the house afire, howled the old woman. When the boss and his wife sat down to dinner, she accused me before them. "Look how he let the candle burn down; he'll set fire to the house!"

Through that dinner I got tongue-lashings from all four of them; all my misdemeanors were reviewed, conscious or unconscious, and my ruin was prophesied. But I was well aware that neither animus on their part, nor concern over my welfare, motivated their scolding. They were merely venting their boredom. And I found it interesting to contrast their vacuous and foolish behavior with that of my literary heroes.

After dinner they became comatose and lumbered wearily to bed. After bothering God with her nagging confidences, the old woman retired to the top of the oven and lay still.

Then I rose and pulled the book out of its hiding place and brought it to the window. It was a moonlit night, but not quite light enough to read such fine print. Tormented by the itch to read on, I took a polished brass pan, and held it so that it reflected light from the moon upon the page; but this produced a blur that added to the strain. Then I went to the bench in the icon corner, and standing on it, I began to read by the dim light of the icon lamp. But, overcome with weariness, I dozed and clattered down on the bench. Howls and blows by the old woman roused me. She was thumping me painfully over the shoulders with the book. She was barefoot and had nothing on but her nightgown; and her face was red with fury and her withered head shook.

All I thought of was, "She's found the book; she's going to tear it up."

My inquisition came at breakfast. Harshly, the boss asked me, "Where'd you get that book?"

The women interrupted each other. Victor sniffed it, and made a face. "What on earth is that smell?"

Hearing that the book was the priest's, they gave it another look, shocked at a priest reading novels. Nevertheless, this somewhat calmed them down, though I got a lecture from the boss on the perils and damage one incurred from books. "Readers of books are your train-robbers and murderers."

In angry dismay, his wife interrupted, "Are you crazy? Putting such things in his mind!"

I brought Montepin to Sidorov, and told him my story, and he wrapped the book in a clean towel and hid it in his trunk. "Don't pay any attention to them," he said. "Do your reading here. I'll keep it quiet. And when I'm not here, you'll find the trunk key behind the icon."

My employers' attitude toward the book made my reading a formidable secret in my mind. That readers of books had held up a train, or attempted a murder, did not trouble me; but my mind dwelt on the priest's question about banned books, at the confessional; on the reading I had witnessed by the student in the cellar; on Smoury's talk of the "right books"; and on grandpa's accounts of the black books of the Freemasons.

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I had heard him say, "In the time of Tsar Alexander¹⁷ of blessed memory, the nobles began studying the black books of the Freemasons. They meant to turn over the Russian people to the Roman pope, nothing less. But they were caught red-handed by General Arakcheyev; and, no matter what their rank was, he packed them off to Siberia; and there they perished like vermin."

And the "umbra pierced by a star" of Smoury's book came to mind, and Gervase and the grotesque verse, "Inquisitive ones, seeking to profane our secrets, never will your weak eyes penetrate them; never will you hear the music of faery."

I felt on the verge of discovering a great secret and went around like a madman. I was trembling to finish the book and terrified lest the soldier lose it or damage it. What to say to the cutter's wife, in that case?

The old woman kept a sharp eye on me to keep me back from the orderly's room. "Bookworm!" she railed at me. "Books teach corruption. Just look at that woman bookworm. She can't even do her own marketing. But she knows how to carry on with the officers! She has them coming all day. I know!"

I wanted to shout out, "It's a lie; she doesn't!" But I dared not come to the defense of the cutter's wife; the old woman might guess, then, that the book belonged to her.

For some days I had an harrowing time. In my agitation, fear that Montepin might receive an injury kept me sleepless. Then the woman who cooked for the cutter's family stopped me in the yard to say, "You must return the book."

I picked the hour after the midday meal, when my employers napped. Despondent and embarrassed, I made my appearance before the cutter's wife. She looked as I had seen her at our first acquaintance, except that she had on different clothes. She was in skirt and blouse, the skirt gray, the blouse black velvet. A turquoise cross lay on her bare neck. She made me think of a female finch. When I told her I had been unable to make the time to read the book, and that I was not allowed to read, tears streamed from my eyes. They had a twofold source: my own misery and the bliss of seeing this woman.

¹⁷ The Tsar who reigned at the time of Napoleon's invasion of Russia.

"Pugh! What ignorant people!" she said, knitting her charming brows. "And your boss' face looks so interesting! Don't let it worry you. I'll send him a letter."

"You mustn't! Don't write!" I pleaded. "They'll laugh at you and mock you. Don't you realize, they're all against you here? They all laugh at you and call you a fool; and they say you're missing some of your ribs."

The moment I had blurted this out, I was aware I had said a word too much and a humiliating word. She bit her underlip and put her hands to her hips like a horsewoman. I lowered my head in my embarrassment, and wished to sink through the floor; but she flung herself into a chair and laughed and laughed, repeating, "How stupid! How stupid!"

Then, fixing her eyes on me, she said with a sigh, "Well, what do we do? You're a strange lad, very strange."

I stole a glance into the mirror at her side, to inspect a face with high cheekbones, a pug nose, a large welt on the brow, and hair badly in need of cutting, which stuck out in all directions. This was her "strange lad." And this strange lad had not the slightest resemblance to a porcelain figurine.

"You didn't take the money I gave you. Why not?"

"I didn't want it."

She heaved a sigh. "What can we do? Any time you're allowed to read, come here, and I'll let you have books."

On the mantelpiece were three volumes; the one I had just returned was the fattest. I gave it a sad look. The cutter's wife gave me her tiny, rosy hand. "Good-by, then!"

Timidly, I touched her hand and ran out.

So it turned out to be true, as they said, that she didn't know anything. Imagine calling two greven money! She was like a child.

But I liked her for it.

Chapter Nine

FOR CERTAIN LUGUBRIOUS REASONS I WELL REMEMBER THE mortification, the indignities, the alarms I incurred in the precipitate growth of my literary appetites. The books belonging to the cutter's wife had a costly look, and since I feared their immolation in the oven by the old woman, I did my best to forget them and turned instead to small, paper-bound volumes on sale in the shop where I made my morning purchase of bread.

Its owner was an unhandsome, thick-lipped individual, whose skin was continually agleam with sweat, whose pallid, wrinkled face was sown with eruptions and their scars, whose eyes were white, and whose bloated hands terminated in stubby, clumsy fingers. His place served as a club for the grown men and the flightier girls on our street. It was my boss' brother's hangout for a nightly glass of beer and a hand of cards. Sent there to summon him to supper, I saw him, or some other young gallant, more than once, in the tiny, airless back room, with the shopkeeper's pink, coquettish wife on his knee. The shopkeeper seemed to take no offense, nor did he seem to mind that his sister, who helped tend shop, lavished her caresses on drunken soldiers, or anybody else, for that matter, who suited her whim.

Business was poor, for which the shopkeeper gave the explanation that it was a new venture, although he had actually opened in the fall. His services to his customers included exhibits of pornographic pictures, and permission to copy the salacious rhymes underneath.

I read the trivial little tales by Misha Yevstigneyev at a rental of a kopeck or so apiece. This was high, while the pleasure I got out of them was nil. As also from such literature as *Gouak*, or *Truth Unconquerable*, *The Venetian*, *The Battle Between*

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the Russians and the Khabardins, or *The Moslem Beauty Who Died on Her Husband's Grave* books that, in fact, annoyed me. I felt laughed at, by these books, for my gullibility; their matter was so incredible and their manner so insipid.

More satisfying were such tales as *The Marksman*, Yury Miloslavsky, *The Mysterious Monk*, Yapancha, and *The Tatar Raider*. Such reading enriched me. But my favorites were the *Lives of the Saints*. These had substance that made them credible, and roused responsive emotions in me. I found resemblances in all the martyrs to Good Idea, and, in the women martyrs, to grandma; and in the hermits to grandpa at his best.

My reading was done in the cold shed, when I went out to split firewood; or in the attic, which I found hardly any warmer or more convenient. When I became absorbed in a book, or had to finish it by a certain time, I would wait till the rest were asleep, and read by candle. Observing the diminution of the candles, the old woman took to measuring them with a piece of wood. And if, in the morning, I had failed to find her measuring rod and notch it to the burned-down length, her outcries would ring through the kitchen.

Once Victor stormed at her, "Cut out that yelling, mama. Sure—he uses up the candles reading books. I know where he gets them—in the store. You'll find them in his stuff in the attic."

Up to the attic the old woman leaped, hunted out a book, and burned it. As you can well understand, this made me furious, but only sharpened my appetite. I realized that if a saint strayed into that household, my employers would have gone to work on him, to tune him to their own key. And the attempt would be made just to give themselves something to do. Had they stopped making judgments on people, nagging them, deriding them, they would have lost the faculty of speech, become mutes, been themselves no longer. One becomes conscious of himself through his contacts with others. No relationship with others was possible to my employers, except that of censorious mentors. Had they educated somebody to their identical way of living, feeling, thinking, then they would have reproached him for that. That was the sort they were.

I kept up my secret reading. This meant the annihilation of several books at the hands of the old woman and I found myself the shopkeeper's debtor for the staggering sum of forty-seven kopecks. He demanded it from me, threatening to withhold it when he made change for me on purchases I made for my employers. "What'll you do then?" he scoffed.

I found him intolerably coarse. He knew it, and retaliated by tormenting me with his threats. He greeted me with a broad leer on his pustular face and the bland inquiry, "Have you come to settle your debt?"

"I can't."

He appeared startled, and frowned. "How come? Are you looking for charity from me? I see I'll have to get my money by fixing up a trip to the reformatory for you."

There was no way I could put my hands on the money, my wages being turned over to grandpa. I got into a panic. What was to become of me? To my pleas for more time, the store-keeper replied by stretching out his greasy, bladder-like hand and saying, "I'll wait if you'll kiss my hand."

Instead, I picked up a weight from the counter and aimed it at his head. He ducked and yelled, "What's the matter? I was only fooling!"

I knew very well he wasn't fooling, and to be quit of him, I decided to steal that sum.

Brushing the boss' clothes in the morning, I heard coins jingling in the trouser pockets, and some, at times, fell out and rolled over the floor. Once two had rolled under the staircase, which I forgot about. Finding them several days later, I had given them back to the boss, and his wife had remarked, "See! Better count the money you leave in your pockets."

With a smile at me he had replied, "I know he won't steal."

Having decided to steal, the recollection of these words and his confiding smile made it hard for me. Several times I took coins out of his pocket, counted them, and then put them back. For three days I kept torturing myself this way, when the problem was solved for me, simply and at once.

The boss surprised me by asking, "What's wrong with you, Peshkov? You've grown so listless, lately. Don't you feel well, or what?"

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I gave him a candid report of what was on my mind. Frowning, he said, "See what your books have gotten you into? Sooner or later books are bound to get people into trouble."

He gave me a half a ruble, cautioning me, "Look, you, not a word about this to my wife or my mother, or there'll be a scandal." With a kind smile, he added, "The devil, but you're persistent! And that's good. Just the same, no books. Come New Year, I'll subscribe to a good journal, so there'll be reading for you."

Thereafter, between tea and late supper, I read aloud to my employers from "The Moscow Leaf," read them installments of novels by Bashkov, Rokshanin, Rudinkovsky, and other literary pap written to enliven people out of their deadly boredom.

I did not enjoy reading aloud, because it kept me from following what I was reading. But my employers were a good audience, paying rapt attention, heaving sighs and congratulating each other, "We lead such decent, peaceful lives, thank God; such things are beyond us!"

Nevertheless, they got everything mixed up, confused the characters' names and had the coachman, Foma Kruchin, performing the feats of the notorious bandit, Churkin. When I set them straight, they expressed surprise. "What a memory that boy has!"

From time to time "The Moscow Leaf" carried poems by Leonid Grav. I was impressed by them, and copied some of them down. My employers' comment was, "He's got very old, you know, so he writes verses. He's a rummy or a half-wit, doesn't matter which."

I also enjoyed the verses of Struzhkin and Count Memento Mori, but the two women found them clumsy, and besides, "Only clowns and actors talk in poetry!"

I found life a trial, those winter evenings in that stuffy room, with my employers' eyes on me all night long. Night lay like a corpse outside the window. Now and then there would sound the crack of frost. They sat around the table dumb as fish in ice. We heard the snowstorm rattle the windows, pound on the walls and scream down the chimney flues, making the valve clatter. From the nursery came the wail of

the children. I had a longing for a corner of my own, where I could howl away like a wolf.

At one corner of the table sat the women with their sewing or knitting. At the other end sat Victor, bent over, reluctantly copying plans, and crying out, now and then, "Stop shaking the table; there's no living here! Goat hooves! Dogs after mice!"

Off to a side sat the boss at a huge embroidery frame, cross-stitching a table cloth. From his fingers grew red lobsters, blue fish, yellow butterflies and russet autumn leaves. It was his own design, and this was his third winter at it. He had wearied of it and, on afternoons, when he saw me with time on my hands, he would say, "Hey, Peshkov, come do a bit of the tablecloth."

I'd get to work at once with the thick needle. I was glad to help the boss, for whom I felt sorry. I had a notion that some day he would quit his drafting table, his embroidery frame, his card games, and turn to something else, something that really interested him, something that I could see came to his mind, and made him drop his work as he gazed at it inwardly, as at something strange. At such moments, with his lank hair dripping over forehead and cheeks, he had the appearance of a neophyte in a monastery.

Then would come the question, "What are you thinking about?" from his wife, and he would resume his work, answering, "Nothing special."

Such a question stunned me. Imagine asking anyone to give an account of his thoughts. There was no answering such a question. One's thoughts were so manifold and evanescent; they speculated on the present; and reviewed the past, yesterday or the year before. They were all so inextricably fused, so fleeting, in such constant flux and ferment.

The installment in "The Moscow Leaf" was not enough to fill the evening, and I dipped into the magazines under the bed. The boss' wife inquired, "What's there to read in them? They're all pictures."

But alongside "The Review of Painting" lay, also, the magazine, "Flames," in which we read *Count Tyatin-Baltisky*, by Salias. The boss took quite a liking to its ludicrous hero,

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laughing over his misadventures until his tears rained down, and shouting, "Now, that's really funny!"

To prove that she had a mind of her own, his wife exclaimed, "Nonsense!"

That library under the bed was a great help to me. It secured me the right to read in the kitchen, and thus to read at night. Once, to my joy, the old woman slept in the nursery, substituting for the drunken nursemaid. Victor did not bother me, for when the rest were asleep, he put on his clothes, slipped out, and didn't get back till morning. No candle was allotted to me; the others took theirs with them; and I had no means to buy any of my own. So I secretly collected scrapings of tallow from the candlesticks, placed them in a can, mixed in some lamp oil, fashioned a wick out of cotton thread, and thus contrived a small, sooty flame. I put this light on the oven.

Turning the pages of the thick tomes made the little red tongue of fire flicker, and the wick submerge in the charring, malodorous grease, while the smoke irritated my eyes. But all these discomforts were forgotten in the pleasure I got in the pictures and their captions. They placed in my ken a world which widened every day, a world splendid like the cities of romance. They brought me views of lofty peaks and lovely beaches. Life unfolded its marvels; earth became more enchanting, studded with towns and laden with treasures.

When I now peered into the reaches beyond the Volga, it was no longer empty space I saw, such as formerly had made me feel strangely lost. Then the meadows had appeared prostrate; then the bushes had been untidy clumps; and then, where the meadows had given way to the woods, the forest had reared its forbidding, jagged wall. And above the meadows the sky had been a stark, cold blue. All in all the earth had seemed lonely and barren, and had had its reflection in my barren heart, bruised by melancholy and emptied of desire. I had thought of nothing and wanted nothing, except to shut it all out. This vacuous melancholia had nothing to offer me, and sucked my heart dry.

But now, in ways that I could comprehend, I learned,

through the captions, about different lands and peoples; I learned of great events, historical and contemporary. Yet, much of it still remained incomprehensible and I was troubled. Strange words lodged in my brain, "metaphysics," "chiliasm," "chartist." My anxiety enlarged them into monsters that obscured my view, preventing me from ever understanding anything. I could not work out their meanings; to me they were sentries barring my access to secret knowledge. In some cases phrases were driven into my mind, like splinters into my skin, making awareness of anything else impossible.

I recall these exotic lines: "Sheathed in steel, through the ravaged land, silent and somber, rides Attila, Tsar of the Huns; behind him the dark press of his warriors, calling, 'Where lies Rome, where lies Rome, the Mighty!'"

I knew Rome was a city, but who the devil were the Huns? I burned to find out.

In what I thought was a favorable moment, I asked my boss.

"The Huns?" he asked, startled. "Devil knows. Rubbishy folk, I suppose." And with a gesture of disapproval, he went on, "That head of yours is filling up with junk. That's bad, Peshkov."

Bad or not, I had to know. The regimental chaplain, Sоловьев, occurred to me as a possible authority on Huns, and the next time I ran across him in the yard, I asked. That pallid, ailing, eternally grouchy man, who had a yellow beard and no perceptible brows over his red eyes, prodded his black staff into the ground and said, "What's that to you!" Lieutenant Nesterov's reply was also an irascible, "What!"

I decided that perhaps the man to ask was the druggist, who gave me friendly looks, had a wise face, and gold-rimmed spectacles astride his big nose.

"The Huns," the druggist told me, "were nomads, like the Kirghiz, but there are none of them left. They died out."

And this exasperated me and made me sad, not because the Huns had died out, but because the word that had so baffled me had turned out to be quite commonplace and useless to me. But I was grateful to the Huns, now that I was no longer troubled when confronted with the word; and to Attila;

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through them I became acquainted with Goldberg, the druggist.

This man could define profound words, had keys to everything knowable. Adjusting his glasses between thumb and forefinger the better to focus on my eyes, he drove in ideas as if he were hammering tacks into my head. "Words, my lad, are like leaves. To discover why they are shaped this way and not that, we must study the growth of the tree. To understand words, my lad, we must know books. Man can be a flourishing garden where every plant is both pleasing and useful."

I was often sent to the drug store for magnesia for the adults, who were afflicted with heartburn, and castor oil and other laxatives for the children.

The clerk's capsule-lectures deepened my interest in books, which in time became as essential to me as alcohol to a toper. They gave me a view of a new life, which exalted the emotions and impulses that led people to heroic feats and crimes. The people I lived among were clearly neither potential heroes nor criminals. They led an existence unrelated to anything I encountered in books; and I found it hard to imagine how they endured their dull lives. I had no wish to lead such a life; in fact, I was determined not to.

From the captions under the illustrations, I had discovered that Prague, London and Paris had no open sewers in the central districts, no gullies used as dumps. Streets were straight and broad, and houses and churches had, each, an individuality of its own. There, no six-month winter imprisoned people in their dwellings; and no long Lenten season limited people to a diet of fermenting cabbage, pickled mushrooms, oatmeal, and potatoes fried in nauseating vegetable oils.

During Lent reading is tabooed; so I was denied "The Review of Painting," and that paltry, arid life reclaimed possession of me. With the life portrayed in books as a contrast, its ugliness and meagreness became more pronounced than ever. With something to read I felt fit and strong; I did my work briskly and well, and had something to anticipate. The quicker I got done, the more time I had for reading. Without my books I became apathetic and forgetful, which I had never been before.

But the somnolence of those days, I recall, was broken by a mystifying event. One night when we were all in bed, the cathedral bell suddenly began to toll, waking everybody. There was a rush of half-dressed people to the windows, a buzz of questions, "Is it an alarm? Is there a fire?"

The same scurry was audible in other apartments. Then doors slammed, and we heard a saddled horse being led across the yard. The old woman screamed that the cathedral had been robbed, but the boss quieted her, "Pipe down, mama; can't you recognize it's not the alarm bell?"

"The archbishop must have died."

Victor came down from his garret room, put on his clothes, and bragged, "I know what's the matter; I know."

The boss sent me up to the garret to see if the sky was red. I got to the roof by way of the gable window. No red glow in the sky. The slow tolling went on in the still, frosty air. The town looked sprawled, in its sleep. Unseen people could be heard in the dark streets, the snow crunching under their boots. The screech of sleigh runners cut through the portentous wailing of the bells.

I returned to the living room to report, "There's no light in the sky."

"Pugh! What, then!" exclaimed the boss, who was in his overcoat and cap. He raised his collar, and gingerly began working his feet into his galoshes.

His wife begged, "Don't go out; don't go out!"

"Ridiculous!"

Victor, also dressed, kept teasing, "I know what's the matter."

After the brothers had left, the women rushed to the window, after sending me to start the samovar. But, almost immediately, the doorbell rang, and the boss ran up the stairs in silence, shut the door, then said in a choked voice, "The Tsar's been assassinated!"

"Assassinated? How?" exclaimed the old woman.

"He's been assassinated. I was told by an officer. What's to happen now?"

Victor came in, reluctantly pulled off his coat, and said crossly, "I was sure it was a war!"

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Then they sat down to tea and a discussion of the event, in controlled, but low and uneasy, tones. The streets were now quiet, and the bells had stopped.

So, for a couple of days, there was a running about and a mystified whispering all around. Visitors came to enlarge on some new item. I did all I could to understand what had occurred, but newspapers were kept from me, and when I asked Sidorov why they had killed the Tsar, he answered warily, "Speaking about it is prohibited."

But the excitement wore off. The customary vacuity returned to this life, and the next break was a highly disagreeable experience.

On a Sunday, when the adults were all in church, I started the samovar, and went to tidy up the other rooms. While I was in another room, the older child got into the kitchen, managed to unscrew the faucet of the samovar, and took it to play with under the table. The charcoal in the samovar was blazing; and, as the water drained out of the open vent, the metal began to overheat, and the solder that joined the separate parts melted. All this produced strange sounds which I heard from the other room. Running into the kitchen, I was dismayed to see the samovar roasted to a blue color, and shaking as if about to jump. The dismantled faucet hung down as though in misery; the lid had heeled over; and the molten pewter was streaming down, drop by drop. All in all the now purplish-blue samovar seemed to be in a drunken delirium. When I poured water over it, it collapsed with a sorrowful hiss, in ruins.

The doorbell rang. My employers were back, and I let them in. In reply to the old woman's question, "Is the samovar ready?" I repeated dumbly, "Yes, it's ready."

This, which was said in confusion and fright, was taken as an impertinence. It brought me a double measure of punishment, that half-killed me. The old woman laid on with a bundle of pine twigs which, though it didn't hurt very much, drove many splinters under my skin. By nightfall, my back had swollen like a pillow, and by the following noon the boss had to take me to the hospital.

On examining me, the rather ludicrously tall and cadaver-

ous doctor said, in a flat, even tone, "Here's a case of cruelty; it calls for investigation."

My boss grew red, and whispered something to the doctor, who looked away and said, "Impossible; can't be done."

Then he asked me, "Do you want to enter a complaint?"

Though I was suffering intense pain, I said, "No; just hurry up and cure me."

I was carried to another room, stretched out on a table, and the doctor pulled out the splinters with tweezers, whose chill touch felt pleasant. "They've adorned your skin artistically, my friend; they've waterproofed you." And when he was through with his ruthless gouging, he said, "Forty-two splinters have been removed, my friend. It's something to remember, a record of a sort! Come back tomorrow, same time, to have the dressing changed. Do they beat you much?"

"Not as much as before."

His comment was a harsh laugh, and, "It'll work out for the best; it's all right."

He brought me back to the boss, to whom he said, "I turn him back to you, repaired. But be sure to have him here tomorrow. You're lucky; quite a comedian you got there!"

In the cab my boss told me, "They used to beat me, too, Peshkov, imagine that! What beatings I got, boy! And you have me to sympathize with you, while I had nobody, not a soul. People are hard on one another, everywhere; no sympathy anywhere. Ekh, wild geese!"

He went on that way. I felt a deep sympathy for him, and gratitude for his treating me as man to man.

I was welcomed back in the house as if it were my birthday. The women had to hear all the details of the treatment, and everything the doctor had said. They were all attention; they sighed; their faces emoted; they covered me with kisses. Such close interest in sicknesses, in aches and pains, in miseries of all sorts, has always puzzled me.

Seeing they were touched by my not having lodged a complaint against them, I took advantage of it to ask permission to borrow books from the cutter's wife. They didn't have the heart to say no, though the old woman fumed, "What a demon he is!"

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The following day I visited the cutter's wife, who told me, "I heard you were sick and in the hospital; look what tales they spread!"

I said nothing, too embarrassed to let her know the truth. Why should she hear of such brutalities? I liked to think of her as different from the rest.

Again I was engrossed in fat tomes by Dumas père, Ponson de Teraille, Montepin, Zaconné, Gaboriau, Emar, and Bouagobert. With voracious haste I consumed them, one after another, and was blissful. I felt myself a participant in a life above the ordinary, which animated me and pricked up my courage. Again, by my makeshift light, I read on through the night, till my eyes showed the strain. The old woman cautioned me, but in a kindly manner, "Watch out, bookworm, or you'll ruin your eyes and go blind!"

I soon became aware, however, that all these entertaining and subtle books, despite their variety of incident and diversity of settings, told much the same story, how good people were abused and hurt by evil people who were cleverer than they, and managed better; yet, in the end, through some sudden turn, they overcame the evil ones and emerged the victors. The "love" on which heroes and the heroines both dilated, I found a bore. In fact, I found it somewhat silly, as well as dull.

My speculations as to who would come out on top and who on the bottom, often began in the opening chapters; as the plot took shape, I began to figure it out on my own. Even away from the books themselves, I had their plots in my mind, and kept working them out as if they were arithmetic puzzlers. Every day I acquired greater skill in forecasting who would be admitted into the paradise of the happy ending and who would be cast into the outer darkness.

Through all this welter, nevertheless, I glimpsed vital and momentous truths, shapes of another life, other criteria. It became evident to me that cabmen, workers, soldiers, and the rest of the "black people"¹⁸ were very different from their counterparts in Nizhny, Kazan or Perm. They did not hesitate to speak to people of the upper classes, and conducted them-

¹⁸ An idiomatic Russian term for the masses.

selves toward them in a more direct and independent manner than did our folk. For example, here was a soldier who resembled none whom I knew, not Sidorov, nor the Viatkin I had met on the boat, and least of all, Yermokhin. There was more human dignity in him than in any of them. He was something like Smoury, but less rude and wild. Here, too, was a store-keeper, but a finer sort than any known to me. And the priests in the books were unlike those I knew, more sensitive, more deeply involved in the fates of their flock. All in all, life abroad, as reflected in the books, appeared more stimulating, more comfortable, and more decent than here. There, people were not so cruel; they never baited a human being as pitilessly as the soldier from Viatka had been, nor did they badger God with their prayers as did the old woman. Above all, I observed that, as portrayed in these books, even brutes, skinflints and other villains did not display the mystifying heartlessness, the derision of man, which I, myself, knew here, and which so frequently caught my attention. The cruelties of these literary villains were calculated; almost always one could see why they behaved so. But the cruelties inflicted here were inflicted without purpose, were entirely irrational; no one gained anything from them.

Every volume I read accentuated this disparity between Russian life and that of other countries, producing a mixture of annoyance and confusion in me, and leading me to suspect the truth of these pored-over pages with their grimy "dogs' ears."

And then I came upon Edmond Goncourt's novel, *The Brothers Zemganno*. I read it through at a sitting, and startled by that, I reread that simple, unhappy story. There were no plot complications, nothing arresting in it. Indeed, the opening pages seemed stiff, rather like the *Lives of the Saints*. At the beginning, the diction, so precise, so devoid of ornament, disappointed me; but soon the spare words, the solidly-worked phrases, impressed me. The fate of the acrobat brothers was described so feelingly, that my hands throbbed with sympathy during the reading. Through tears I read how the ill-fated artist crawled, on his broken legs, to the garret where his brother was secretly practicing new turns.

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When I brought this magnificent book back to the cutter's wife, I requested another, just like it. "What do you mean, just like it?" she asked with a laugh. Confused by her laugh, I couldn't express my wishes. Then she said, "That's a dry story. Wait! I'll get one for you that's more interesting."

And a day or two later she gave me Greenwood's *The True History of a Little Waif*. The title prejudiced me against it; however, the very first pages evoked rapturous smiles from me; and I smiled on, to the end, rereading some pages several times.

So there were other lands where boys led hard and harassed lives! Then my lot was not so miserable; no need to pity myself. I took heart from Greenwood.

Soon afterwards, I got a "real" book to read, *Eugenie Grandet*. Old Grandet brought grandpa vividly to mind. I was exasperated at the brevity of the book, and amazed how much truth it held. Truths, familiar enough to me, and boring enough in life, now took on other aspects, as they were seen objectively and without anger. The books I had read before I got to Greenwood, damned people as mercilessly and garrulously as my employers, frequently provoking me into sympathy with the villain and annoyance with the heroes. And I always somewhat regretted to see so much wit and resolution go to waste, as the villains were frustrated. The heroes, immobile as stone columns, waited, from first page to last, for events to take their course; and, though one beheld these stone columns, beset by plotters of every evil, stones do not stir up the emotions. The grace and solidity of a wall has no appeal to him who wants the apple hanging on the tree, on its other side. It appears to me that that which is most desirable and vital has always been pushed, by the "good people," into the background.

Goncourt's, Greenwood's and Balzac's people were no villains, but wonderfully living people. One never questioned anything they were reported to have said and done; nothing else could have been said and done by them. Thus I discovered what joy is to be found in a "proper" book. But how to search it out? There the cutter's wife was not much help.

"Here's a good one," she said, offering me Arsene Huisser's

Hands Filled with Roses, Gold and Blood. She also introduced me to the novels of Henri Beyle,¹⁹ Paul de Kock and Paul Feval, which I relished; but she recommended those of Marietta and Vernier, which I found dull. Schpielhagen did not appeal to me, but Auerbach did; and I preferred Walter Scott to Victor Hugo and Eugene Sue. I sought books which elated me as did my marvelous Balzac.

My feeling for the porcelain woman cooled down. On my visits to her I wore a fresh blouse, combed my hair, and tried to look handsome, but with little success. A better appearance, I hoped, would induce her to more natural and friendly speech and behavior toward me, and some other expression than that blank, fish-smile on her frivolous face. But all I got was that smile and that inevitable question in her sugary, limp voice, "You read it? How did you like it?"

"Not much."

With raised eyebrows, she gave me a stare, then, with an in-drawn breath that made her talk through her nose, she asked, "Why?"

"I've read all about that."

"About what?"

"About love."

Her eyes sparkled as she gave her syrupy laugh. "But don't you understand every book is about love?"

She sat in her spacious armchair, her little swinging feet slippers in fur, her blue robe wrapped around her. As she yawned and tapped her pink fingertips on the book on her knee, I wanted to tell her, "Better move away! The officers keep writing you letters and making fun of you."

But I did not dare, and I went off with a tome on *Love*, dis-enchantment saddening my heart.

The yard gossip about this woman had increased in vileness, venom and spite. I took offense at the obscene talk, which I was sure was all fabrication. Away from her, I was all sympathy for her; but in her presence, observing her small, quick eyes, her catlike suppleness, and the always frivolous expression on her face, my sympathy and my concern for her evaporated.

¹⁹ Stendhal.

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Suddenly, in the spring, she disappeared; and a few days later, her husband moved away.

Before the advent of a new tenant, I visited the vacant rooms, looked at the bare walls and the nail scars. Bits of colored cloth, crumpled balls of paper, broken drug boxes and empty perfume bottles littered the dirty floor. Among them glittered a big brass pin.

And, all of a sudden, I had a twinge of regret and a desire to see the cutter's little wife a last time, and give her my thanks.

Chapter Ten

BEFORE THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE CUTTER'S WIFE, THERE moved into the apartment below us a dark-eyed young lady, her young daughter, and her gray-haired mother, a chain-smoker, equipped with an amber mouthpiece. The young lady was beautiful and proud, and her voice was deep and melodious. Her head was held high and her eyes were unwavering, as if she saw everybody from a distance. On most days her swarthy soldier-servant, Tufayev, led a fine-legged, brown horse to the door; and out strode the lady in a sweeping, velvet dress, steel-gray in color, her feet shod in tan riding boots, and her hands gloved in white gauntlets. In one hand she held the train of her skirt and a riding crop, with a lilac-colored gem set into the handle; with the other she petted the muzzle of the horse, who fixed his enormous eyes on her, quivered, and deliberately pawed the muddy ground with his hooves.

"Robert, Robert," she murmured (giving it the French pronunciation, *Robaire*), and stroked his handsome, arched neck with a strong hand. Then, using Tufayev's knee as a step, she vaulted deftly into the saddle, and with a proud bearing, the horse pranced through the gate. Her seat in the saddle had such ease, she might have grown from it. She had that individual type of beauty that is always fresh, and always astonishes and jubilantly intoxicates the heart. The sight of her made me think that Diane of Poitiers, Queen Margot, the young La Valliere, and other storied beauties must have been like her.

In constant attendance upon her were the officers of the local garrison division. In the evenings these visitors played the piano, the violin or the guitar, and sang and danced. Her most frequent guest was fat, gray-haired, red-faced Major Olesov, whose greasiness made me think of a steamboat engineer. He

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kept circling her on his stumpy legs. He was good on the guitar. And he acted up to her as the devoted, all-suffering swain.

As radiantly lovely as her mother was her plump, curly-haired five-year-old daughter. Her big, dark blue eyes looked about her with serene expectancy; she had a thoughtful air that made her seem not quite a child. The housekeeping took up all her grandmother's time, though she had the help of Tufayev, who was close-mouthed and gloomy, and a maid who was fat and crosseyed. There was no nursemaid, and the little girl was quite neglected, getting almost no adult attention. She played all day on the doorsteps, or on a pile of boards nearby. I took a liking to her, and often, toward dark, I went out and played with her. Soon she got so used to me she would fall asleep in my arms, as I told her stories, after which I carried her in to bed. In time she refused to go to sleep until I bid her good night. Holding out her chubby hand with quite an air, she would say, "Good-by, see you tomorrow. Grandma, what do I say next?"

"God keep you," recited the grandmother, puffs of dark blue smoke issuing from her mouth and bony nose.

"God keep you till tomorrow! And now I'm going to sleep," said the child, rolling up in the lace-trimmed bedclothes.

"Not till tomorrow, but always," corrected her grandmother.

"But tomorrow means always, doesn't it?"

She was in love with the word "tomorrow," reserving for it everything that delighted her. She would stick the stems of cut flowers or branches blown down by the wind into the ground, asserting, "Tomorrow it will be a garden." "Tomorrow I'll buy myself a horse and ride on his back like mama."

Though she was clever, she was not an active child. Often some passing thought would stop her in the midst of a lively game; or she would break off to surprise me with some question, like, "Why is a priest's hair long like a woman's?"

If she pricked her hand on a thorn, she would shake her fingers at it and say, "You'll see! I'll pray to God to do something very, very bad to you. God can do very bad things to anybody. He can punish mama, too."

At times, a gentle, grave mood would settle upon her; she would snuggle close to me, look up into the sky with her con-

fiding, blue eyes and tell me, "Grandma gets mad sometimes, but not mama; because mama only laughs. Everybody loves her because she's too busy. She's so beautiful people come to look at her. Mama is so attractive, that's what Joseph says."

I enjoyed her prattle, because it echoed a world of which I knew nothing. She spoke very freely about her mother, and a new vista of life stretched before me. It brought Queen Margot back to mind, which confirmed my faith in books, and intensified my interest in life.

Once, sitting on the steps outside, waiting for my folks to return from a walk, the child dozed off in my arms, and her mother, back from a canter, lightly dismounted, gave a toss of her head, and asked, "Is she sleeping?"

"Yes."

"Good."

The soldier, Tufayev, dashed up, and led the horse away. She stuck her riding crop into her belt, said, "Let me have her," and reached out her arms.

"Let me carry her in."

"Hey, there!" the lady burst out at me, as though to her horse; and she stamped her foot on the step. This woke the little girl who, seeing her mother through her fluttering lashes, reached out her arms to her.

Accustomed though I was to being shouted at, I would rather not have had it from this lady. No matter how quietly given, one jumped to any command of hers.

A minute or two later, their crosseyed maid came out to me. The little girl was being stubborn; she wouldn't go to bed without bidding me good night. I could not avoid some cockiness when I approached her mother, who had the little girl on her knees, and was undressing her with swift, capable hands.

"He's here, that monster," she said.

"He's my boy, not a monster."

"Is that so? That's good. You'd like to give your boy something, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I would."

"That's a good idea. We'll take care of it; and now to bed."

"Good-by till tomorrow," the little girl said, giving me her hand. "God keep you till tomorrow."

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"Who taught you that, grandma?" exclaimed the lady, startled.

"Yes."

When the child had gone to her room the lady called me over. "What would you like?"

I told her I wanted nothing, but would like to borrow a book.

She chuckled my chin with her warm, perfumed fingers, smiled agreeably, and said, "So you like books? What have you read?"

The smile made her look still more dazzling, and in my confusion, I rambled off some titles.

"What did you see in them?" she asked, lightly tapping on the table with her fingers.

A heavy flower scent of some sort, overlaying a smell of horse sweat, came from her. She gazed at me through long eyelashes, in a penetrating, thoughtful look, such as I could not remember having got from anybody before.

The room was stuffed as full as a bird's nest with lovely, upholstered furniture. Heavy green drapes covered the windows. A pale luster, in that dim light, came from the snow-white tiles of the oven, a black luster gleamed from the piano nearby. From the walls, framed in dull gold, peered dark scrolls in large Russian script, with a big seal, suspended by a cord, from each. The very things around her seemed to share my diffidence and submission to her.

To the best of my ability, I explained how reading helped me through the darkness and drudgery of my life.

"So that's it," she said, rising. "Not a bad notion; indeed, it's a bit of all right. What to do? I'll get you some books; but right now I have none around. Just a second; take this one."

She picked up a battered, yellow-covered volume off the couch. "When you've finished this I'll give you the second volume; it's in four volumes."

I went off with Prince Meshchersky's *Petersburg Secrets*, which I started with avid interest. Before I had turned many pages, however, I realized that Petersburg's secrets interested me far less than those of London, Paris or Madrid. The only

thing I took a fancy to was the dispute between *Svoboda* (freedom) and *Palka* (cane):

Svoboda asserted, "I'm your superior; I have the brains."

Palka retorted, "No, I'm your superior; I have the power."

The dispute ended in a fight, with *Palka* the victor. If my memory serves me, *Svoboda* had to be taken to the hospital, where she died of her injuries.

There were references to Nihilists in the book. To Prince Meshchersky, as I recall, a Nihilist was such a venomous character that his very glance was enough to poison a chicken. I found the comments on the Nihilists offensively coarse, but that was all that I understood, which upset me. Apparently I could not respond to good books, as I believed this one to be, since I could not conceive of so grand and beautiful a lady reading poor ones.

"Did you enjoy it?" she asked, when I returned Meshchersky's yellow book.

It was a strain to admit to her that I hadn't, for fear that she might take offense; but she merely laughed and, parting the portieres which curtained off her bedroom, she picked up a small volume in a dark blue, morocco binding.

"You'll enjoy this one," she said, "but be careful; don't soil it."

It was a collection of Pushkin's poems. I read them through in a rush, greedily drinking them in as if I had come upon some breathtaking new scene, in whose every corner I tried to be at once. It was as if, after toiling across mossy footholds in a bog, one were suddenly to see spread before him a sunny, flower-decked meadow over which, after a fascinated glance, he gambols blissfully, feeling a pulsation of joy at every touch of his foot on the resilient herbage.

The melody and the spontaneity of poetry, as I found it in Pushkin, so overwhelmed me that for long afterwards, prose seemed artificial beside it, and hard to read. The *Ruslan*²⁰ prologue recalled grandma's choicest tales, all packed into one; and some lines stunned me with their ringing truth:

²⁰ A narrative poem by Pushkin.

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"There on barely visible trails, glide the invisible creatures of the wild."

Repeating these thrilling phrases to myself recalled those trails I had learned to see, that were invisible to others. I saw the obscure footprints upon the trampled grass, on which gleamed still unshed dewdrops, heavy as mercury. The round, resonant lines were easy to remember. What they spoke of took on luster as if adorned for a fête. They brought gaiety and ease into my life. Like chimes the verses rang in a new day for me. What a joy it was to have learning!

Pushkin's wonderful tales touched me more intimately, and I understood them better, than all I had read hitherto. After several rereadings, I knew them by heart; on going to bed, I repeated the lines under my breath, till sleep overcame me. I told the tales to the orderlies, who listened, laughed and kidded me about them. But Sidorov patted my head and murmured, "That's something, now, isn't it? Oh, God——"

My employers took note of the new sense of life that I felt. The old woman scolded, "You read too much; the samovar's not been cleaned these last four days. You young ape, I'll have to get out the rolling pin for you!"

The rolling pin? Who cared? I had the verses for sanctuary. "Hag, you have given your heart to the devil!"

My esteem for the lady mounted, since such were the books she read. She was different from the cutter's little porcelain wife.

When, regretfully, I returned the book, the lady asked, in a manner that encouraged confidences, "Did you enjoy it? Have you heard about Pushkin?"

I had seen something about Pushkin in a newspaper, but, desiring to have her comment, I said, "Never." So she gave me a brief account of Pushkin's life and death,²¹ and, with a smile like a day in spring, she concluded, "See the danger of loving a woman?"

What I had read had all illustrated the dangers, but also the raptures, of love, so I replied, "There's danger; but everybody falls in love, just the same; and women suffer for it, too."

²¹ Pushkin was killed in a duel with an admirer of his wife.

She gave me one of her characteristic looks, under her lashes, and said earnestly, "You believe that? You understand it? The best thing I can wish you is to have it always in mind." And she asked which verses were my favorites.

I declaimed some from memory, with sweeping gestures. After listening in grave silence, she rose, paced about the room, and said soberly, "We must see that this wild one gets some education, I must give it some thought. Your employers—*are they your relations?*"

Hearing me answer, "Yes," she exclaimed, "Oh!" at me, as if I were to blame.

She lent me the *Songs of Beranger*, in a de luxe edition, illustrated, gilt-edged and bound in red leather. The odd blend of inconsolable grief and lusty gaiety in these lyrics made me a little dizzy.

It was with an icy clench at the heart that I read the sardonic challenge in the "Old Beggar":

"Do I, the homeless worm, intrude? Then step on me; squash me! Why take pity on me? Quick, down with your crushing heel! Why did you never teach me, never provide scope for my powers; then from the worm might have come an ant; dying, I would have been content in the love of comrades. Instead, in my death, an old beggar takes a small vengeance on the world."

And immediately after, I laughed until the tears came, over "The Weeping Husband." I particularly recall the lines: "To the simple it is simple to master the science of a happy life."

Beranger put me into a cheerful, cocky mood, in which I dared to be pert and even uncivil to people, to make rude and cutting remarks. Skill in such accomplishments came quickly to me. I learned Beranger's stanzas by heart, too, and I liked to declaim them to the orderlies, when they dropped into the kitchen. But not for long. The lines, "But such a hat's unsuitable to a maid of seventeen," turned the conversation to such ribaldry on the subject of young girls, that I was provoked into laying a saucepan over Yermokhin's head. I was delivered out

of his clumsy grip by Sidorov and the other orderlies; but from then on, I resolved to stay away from the officers' kitchen.

Any gadding about in the street was forbidden me; and, in any case, I lacked the time, my work had so piled up. To my chores as household drudge, porter and errand-boy, had been added the preparation of frames—calico nailed to boards—on which plans were tacked, copying down my boss' architectural data, and checking his accounts with contractors. My busy boss was at it into the night, working incessantly, like a machine.

In those days the structures of the annual Nizhny-Novgorod Fair were in private hands. The rows of booths were put up in haste. My boss had contracts for both reconstruction and new construction. He made plans for altering vaults, building out gable windows, and so on. I took my boss' plans to an elderly architect; secreted in the large envelope in which the plans were enclosed, were twenty-five rubles in bills. He pocketed the money, and then signed the plans, "Tested and approved after inspection at the site. Imiarek." Actually, he inspected nothing, being confined indoors by his infirmity.

I brought bribes, also, to the Inspector of the Fair, and to other big shots from whom I acquired what the boss termed, "documents," authorizing certain building violations. For all this I earned the privilege of sitting on the doorstep, waiting for the return of my employers from a visit. The visits were infrequent, but when they occurred, they lasted past midnight. From my seat on the top step, or on the stacked lumber opposite, I looked up for hours into the windows of the lady's apartment, hungrily absorbing the music and the merry talk.

Through the curtains and the flowers that hedged the open window, I could see the handsome figures of the officers, the round major rolling, and she gliding about in a beautiful, but markedly simple, dress. To myself, I had named her Queen Margot, and thought, staring into the windows: This is the high life described in the French novels. And I felt melancholy as I succumbed to the pangs of a childish jealousy, watching the men swarm about her like bees around a flower.

The rarest of her visitors was a tall, moody-looking officer, whose eyes were sunken deep under worried brows. He always

brought along a violin, which he played so ravishingly that passersby stopped to listen, joining the people from our street already crowding under the window. My employers, too, if they were home, would open their windows to hear it and praise it. I cannot recall their having praised any other person, unless it was the deacon's assistant at the cathedral; and a fish-patty, I knew, excited them more than any music.

At other times this officer sang or recited poems to her, with his hand to his brow, and his voice choking with sighs. Once I was with the little girl under their window, when I heard Queen Margot coaxing him to sing, and he reiterated his refusals. He ended it with these lines, spoken in a distinct voice: "A song has need of beauty, but beauty has no need of a song."

I admired these lines, and sympathized with the officer.

Above all, I loved to watch my lady when she was alone, at the piano. In the intoxication of the music, only her window existed for me, and the yellow light within; and in that light, her graceful woman's figure and the imperious profile, the white hands fluttering like birds over the keys. I stared, I heard the moody music, I dreamed. If I could but dig up a treasure, she should have it all and be rich. Had I been Skobelov²² I would have renewed the Turkish War, and with the money won in ransoms, I would have built a house for her on the Otkosa, the choicest district in town. Let her but move from this street, where she had become the butt of the vilest gossip. The neighbors and their servants, and, above all, my employers, spoke of her as filthily and maliciously as about the cutter's wife; but more warily, with muffled voices and nervous glances around them.

Her position as the widow of a man of high rank put some fear into them, I suppose. The framed inscriptions on her walls were awards bestowed on his ancestors by former Tsars—Godunov, Alexis, Peter the Great. This I learned from Tufayev, a man with some letters, who was forever poring over the Gospels. Or it may have been that people feared a horsewhipping at her hands, with that riding crop inset with the lilac

²² Russian general who won victories over the Turks.

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stone, which she was reported to have used, before, on a scandal monger. But words are not better for being muttered instead of shouted out. A cloud of enmity enveloped my lady, as disturbing as it was incomprehensible to me.

With the knowledge now of another life, of other sorts of people, emotions, thoughts, the old life became ever more distasteful and wearisome to me. It was wound around in a dirty web of shameless gossip, which left no one untouched. It converted the sickly and unhappy regimental chaplain into a dissolute toper. My employers had it that every officer and his wife were profligates. The same burden filled the soldier's talk about women, talk that had become nauseating to me. Of all the gossips, however, I found my employers the most offensive, knowing too well what value to put on their favorite diversion, ruthless judgments upon others. To spy and expatiate upon the misbehavior of others was the one entertainment which they could have without expense. They enjoyed putting everybody they knew on their verbal rack; thereby, so to speak, retaliating on others for their tedious, tabooed, toilsome lives.

On hearing their obscenities about Queen Margot, I was shaken by a paroxysm of emotion far removed from any childish feelings. My heart dilated with hatred toward the slanderers. I felt an uncontrollable urge to hurt everybody, to flout them all. And, at times, a gush of searing pity for myself and for everybody, flowed over me. That voiceless pity ached more than hatred.

As regards my queen, I knew more about her than they; my fear was that they would discover it, too.

On Sundays, when my employers were celebrating mass at the cathedral, I started the morning with a visit to her. She called me into her bedroom where, sitting in a gold silk upholstered armchair, with the little girl on my knee, I reported on my week's reading. She lay in her wide bed, her face in her small cupped hands, her body covered by a quilt, gold in color like everything else in the room. The braid in which her dark hair was coiled, hung over her shoulder and bosom, and sometimes down to the floor. Listening, she gazed at me with her luscious eyes, and with a barely perceptible smile, gave me her approval, "That's good."

To my sight her kindest smile was the condescension of a queen. Her voice was deep and gracious, and it seemed to declare in every phrase, "I realize my immeasurable superiority. I can do without anybody."

I sometimes came upon her at her looking glass, before which she sat on a low chair, dressing her hair, strands of which lay on her knees and over the back and arms of the chair, almost reaching the floor. Her hair was as long and abundant as grandma's. She put on her stockings in my presence; and I felt unembarrassed; there was something clean in her nakedness. All I felt was happy pride in her beauty; her flower-like fragrance was a defense against unruly impulses. The love discoursed in kitchen gossip was alien to her, I was sure. Hers was something else, on a higher plane.

However, one late afternoon, on entering the parlor, I heard a peal of laughter from the lady of my heart, from the bedroom, and a man's voice saying, "Just a minute! Lord, it's inconceivable—"

I should have gone, I knew, but could not.

"Who's there?" she called out. "Oh, you? Come in."

The bedroom was dim, the curtains being drawn; the air was heady with the perfume of flowers. Queen Margot was in bed, the coverlet drawn up to her chin; beside her, sitting back against the wall, was the violin-playing officer, stripped down to his shirt, and his chest showing. It was red-striped by a scar on the right side, that extended from the nipple to the shoulder, and was so distinct that I would see it clearly even in that dim light. His hair was playfully mussed, and the first smile I ever saw there lit his moody, lined face. It was a strange smile; his glowing, feminine eyes were fixed on the queen as if in a first spellbound sight of her beauty.

"My friend," Queen Margot introduced us, and I was at a loss to know whether I or he was the friend referred to. "Why that scared look?" I heard her ask me, as if from far away, "Come here!"

When I came to her she put her hands around my shoulders, and said, "You'll grow up a happy man. Now run along."

I put one book back on the shelf, and took another, and was off.

I felt a rasping in my heart. Actually, I did not believe my queen gave her love like other women, and the officer gave me no cause to feel so. I could remember his face and his smile. His face was amazingly transformed in that joyful smile, like a child who has suddenly been made happy. His love for her was inevitable. Who could help loving her? And she had good cause to lavish her love on him; he played so beautifully, and recited poetry so eloquently. But my very need for those rationalizations made it clear to me that there was something amiss in my reaction to what I had witnessed, and even to Queen Margot herself. I sensed some loss, and was thrown into a depression that lasted for days. On one of these days, I had behaved with rash and riotous truculence, and when I came to my lady for a book, she said severely, "From what I hear you're quite a desperado. That I didn't know."

I was exasperated and described the nauseating existence I had to endure; and I told her how unbearable I found it to hear her ill-spoken of. At first she listened with earnest attention, keeping her hand on my shoulder; soon she began to laugh, and playfully pushed me off. "Enough; I know all about that. Understand me? I know."

Then she took me by both hands and said affectionately. "The less thought you give to it the better. You don't wash your hands very well."

She could have spared me that. Had she had to polish brass, scrub floors and do laundry, her hands would have turned out no better.

"He who knows how to live is slandered out of envy. And he who doesn't know how to live is despised," she said soberly, pulling me to her and smiling at me. "Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"A lot?"

"Yes."

"But how much?"

"I don't know."

"Thank you. You're a good lad. I want people to love me." She said it with a smile, as if she were about to add something, but she said, instead, after a silence, during which she held me

close to her, "Come to see me more often. Come as often as you can."

I presumed upon this to my great benefit. When my employers took their after-dinner siestas, I ran over, and if she was home, spent an hour or so with her.

"You'll have to read Russian books, learn about Russian life." And she began teaching me, as she pinned up her fragrant hair with her rosy fingers. She recited a list of Russian authors. "Will you try to remember them?"

Often she said, in a preoccupied and almost fretful manner, "We'll have to see to your education. The thing keeps slipping my mind. Oh, God!" And from such visits, I went off, a new book in my hand, and a new feeling inside, as if I had been cleansed within.

By that time I had already read Aksakov's *Chronicles of a Russian Family*, *Recollections of a Sportsman* and the magnificent Russian poem, "In the Forests," some volumes of Grebenko and Sologub and the poems of Venevitinov, Odoyevsky and Tiuchev. These books bathed my soul, carrying off the dregs of sterile and sour realities. I appreciated the quality of these books which had become indispensable to me. One gain to me from their reading was the realization that I was not all alone on this earth; a sense of not being lost in this life took hold within me.

On grandma's visits I enjoyed telling her about Queen Margot. Taking her snuff with added gusto, grandma remarked with conviction, "Now, that's fine; so you see there are good people around; you'll find them if you look for them." And once, she offered, "Suppose I go to thank her for you." But I told her, "No need of that."

"All right, if you don't want me to. Lord, how good everything is! I feel like living forever!"

Queen Margot's educational project for me never came through, because of an accident that occurred on Trinity Sunday, and that nearly did for me. Some days before the holiday, I suffered such swellings of my eyelids as to virtually close my eyes. My employers feared I was going blind, and I shared their fear. I was taken to the famous oculist, Rodzevich, who

lanced the eyelids, after which, for several days, I lay in torturing, gloomy shadows, my eyes covered with bandages. The day before Trinity Sunday, the bandages were removed, and I walked like one who had experienced burial alive. Nothing can be more dreadful than the loss of one's sight, an incalculable injury that deprives one of dozens of worlds.

Festive Trinity Sunday came and, excused from my chores as a convalescent, I made a call on the orderlies in their kitchen. They were all drunk, including the puritanical Tufayev. During the afternoon, Yermokhin clouted Sidorov over the head with a club. Sidorov fell down unconscious, and the frightened Yermokhin ran away.

The alarm spread through the yard that Sidorov had been murdered, and people crowded around to look at his body sprawled motionless in the threshold. It was proposed that the police be called, but no one went for them; and no one dared touch the unconscious man. At that point, Natalie Kozlovsky, the laundress, hove in sight, all dolled out in a new blue dress and white kerchief. She shouldered the spectators aside, entered the kitchen doorway, bent down and shouted, "Fools, he's alive; fetch some water!"

They upbraided her, "What are you meddling for? It's none of your business!"

"Water!" she repeated, as loud as if the place were on fire. Picking up her new dress and spreading out her petticoat in a deft and efficient manner, she took the soldier's bleeding head upon her knees. The timorous and disapproving crowd scattered. In the dim hallway light, I could see the angry, tearful eyes of the laundress flashing in her round, pale face. I brought her a pail of water, with which she directed me to douse Sidorov's face and chest, taking care not to spill any on her. "I'm going visiting," she explained.

The soldier recovered consciousness; his bleary eyes opened, and he fetched a groan.

"Lift him up," Natalie directed, holding him from her so as not to stain her dress. We dragged him into the kitchen and got him into bed. She sponged his face with a damp cloth and give me these instructions before she left, "Keep the cloth wet and hold it over his head, while I rout out the other fool. The

devils! When they've drunk themselves into jail maybe they'll think they've had enough." Then, after slipping her stained petticoat to the floor, and kicking it into the corner, she went out, tidying her rumpled dress.

Sidorov stretched, hiccupped and sighed. From his head, warm, sticky blood dripped on my bare feet. Unpleasant though it was, I was too rigid with fright to move my feet. Out in the yard the sun shone with a festive glow; young birch boughs decorated steps and gates and fresh boughs of maple and ash decorated the lintels. The leafage brightened the whole street; everything looked new and young. It had seemed to me, that morning, that with the holiday spring had come to stay, and that life had become more joyful, shining and clean.

The soldier felt sick. Stale vodka and scallions fumed, in a suffocating stench, through the kitchen. On the windows were gaping faces of spectators, looking hideous flattened against the pane, with hands pressed to their cheeks.

Toiling out of the fog of unconsciousness, the soldier muttered, "What's the matter with me? Yermokhin, my pal, did I fall?" Then he had a coughing fit, followed by a fit of drunken weeping, and he groaned, "Oh, sister, my little sister!"

He staggered, dripping, out of bed, then fell back again and, with his eyes rolling grotesquely, howled, "They've practically killed me," which struck me funny.

"What the hell are you giggling about?" he asked me, with a foggy look. "Here I am killed for eternity, and you laugh!" And he flailed at me with his hands, mumbling, "It was the prophet, Elijah, the first time; and St. George on his horse, the second time; and the third time—keep away from me, you wolf!"

"Don't be an idiot!" I retorted.

In witless rage, he stamped his feet and howled, "I'm killed, while you—" And he gave me a poke in the eyes with his big, grimy fist. Almost blinded, I yelled, and felt my way into the yard, where I encountered Natalie hauling Yermokhin in by the arm, yelling, "Get going, you horse!" Stopping me, she asked, "What's happened to you?"

"He's come to."

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"He's come to, has he?" she exclaimed, dragging the words out in astonishment. Giving Yermokhin a tug, she said, "That's something you can thank God for, werewolf!"

I bathed my eyes. Looking in, I saw the two soldiers being reconciled, with embraces and tears. Both tried to hug Natalie, but she cuffed them off, exclaiming, "Don't you paw me, you dogs! What do you think I am? Better go to bed and sleep it off before your bosses get back, or you'll be in a worse mess!"

At her bidding, they lay down like little children, one on the floor, the other on the cot; and when they were snoring, she came out on the porch.

"What a sight I am now! And I started out, all dressed up, for my visit. So he punched you, that idiot! That's what vodka brings them to! Don't take to drink, little chap, don't ever take to drink!"

We sat down on the bench by the gate, and I asked her what made her so fearless with drunks. "I'm not scared of them sober, either. If they bother me, here's what I'll give them!" and she raised her firm, red fist. "My dead husband hit the bottle, too. I tied him up, hand and foot, once, when he was drunk; and after he'd slept it off, I gave him a thrashing—for his own good—and I told him, 'You have your wife for fun, not vodka!' I gave him such a talking-to, talked till I was tired; and he was like wax in my hands, afterward."

"You're strong," I said, thinking of the woman, Eve, who had fooled God himself.

Sighing, Natalie answered, "A woman has to be stronger than a man; she has to have the strength of two, and that's how God has made her. A man's such a flighty creature."

She spoke coolly, without rancor, as she sat there, leaning back against the fence, her arms akimbo over her massive bosom, her eyes fixed somberly on the gutter, coated with dust, and cluttered with rubbish. Listening to her shrewd comments, I lost track of the time when, suddenly, the boss hove to with his wife on his arm. Their gait was slow and sedate; they might have been a turkey cock and his hen; they gave us a close look and made some remarks to each other.

I sprang up to open the door to them. As she came up the

stairs, the boss' wife said viciously, "So, you're shining up to the washer-woman? Carrying on with that kind, are you?"

I could not even feel annoyance at such stupidity, but I took offense at my boss when he laughed, and said, "It's time; that's to be expected."

Next morning, in the woodshed, I found an empty purse stuck into the hole in which the door was hooked down. Recognizing it as Sidorov's purse, I took it to him immediately.

He felt into its vacant depths. "Where's the money; the thirty rubles? Give me them!"

His head was turbaned in a towel. He looked green and sickly his swollen eyes twitched with wrath. He would not take my word that the purse was empty when I found it.

Yermokhin, coming in, concurred with Sidorov, with accusing wags of his head at me, "Sure, he stole it. Take him to his boss. Soldiers don't steal from each other!"

This made me think he was the thief and the one who had flung the empty purse into my woodshed. I had no hesitation in saying it to his face, "Liar; you're the one who stole it!"

I realized I was right when I saw his dull face contort with exasperation and fear. He shook, and screeched, "Prove it, prove it!"

How could I? Yermokhin, bellowing, towed me over the yard, with Sidorov bellowing in accompaniment behind us. Heads appeared at windows, Queen Margot's mother's, with its cigarette, among them. The thought that my lady's respect for me was in decline, maddened me.

I recall standing in the grip of the two soldiers before my employers, who were nodding agreement to the soldiers' charges. The boss' wife even confirmed it. "He must have taken that money! I saw him petting with that washerwoman on the bench last night, and that took money. That kind has to be paid for it!"

"Of course!" agreed Yermokhin.

Driven into a frenzy by this, I called the boss' wife names, and got myself a thrashing. But I ached, not from the beating, but my concern over Queen Margot's reaction to the affair. How to restore myself in her esteem? What agonies of mind I

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suffered! I escaped strangling myself only because there was no time for it.

Luckily, through the babbling of the soldiers, the story was soon over the yard and the street, and before the day was over I heard, from the attic where I lay, the ringing voice of Natalie Kozlovsky down below. "No! Why should I keep quiet? Let me alone, you! If you don't I'll have something to tell your officer that'll fix you!"

I sensed, immediately, that all this uproar had to do with me. It was happening practically on our doorstep; Natalie's voice was loud and exultant as she asked Yermokhin, "You showed me a wad of money yesterday; how much did it amount to? And where did it come from? Come on, tell us!"

Almost gasping with joy, I heard Sidorov's aggrieved voice, "So; Yermokhin—"

"And the boy had to suffer for it; you got him a beating for it!"

How I wanted to dash down to the yard, hop with glee, and shower the laundress with grateful kisses; but, that very moment, seemingly from the window, the boss' wife yelled down, "The boy was thrashed because he was impudent. No one thought him a thief except you, you tart!"

"Tart, yourself! Allow me to tell you, madam, you're no better than a cow!"

This exchange was like music to my ears. Scalding tears of self-pity and thankful tears for Natalie bubbled in my heart. With difficulty I choked them back.

My boss dragged himself up to the attic, and, sitting on a projecting rail, and stroking his hair, said, "So, brother Peshkov, you had no hand in it."

I turned away from him without answering. "Just the same, the language you used was inexcusable," he said; and I replied, with composure, "The minute I can get up, I'm leaving."

He pulled at his cigarette in silence, his eyes staring at its tip. Then he said in a low voice, "Well, that's up to you. You're not a little boy any longer. Look around you and decide what's best for you." He left me and, as always, I felt sorry for him.

Four days later I went away. I was aching with the desire to

bid good-by to Queen Margot, but I couldn't get up the courage for it, and I must admit, I was waiting for her to invite me. When I made my farewells to her daughter, I said, "Tell your mama, will you, I thank her very much."

"Yes," she promised, and with a fond, sweet smile, she added, "Good-by till tomorrow."

Our next meeting was twenty years later; she was the wife of a gendarmes officer.

Chapter Eleven

AGAIN I WAS A MESS BOY ON A STEAMER, THE PERM, A FAST, roomy vessel, white as a swan. This time I served as a "black" mess boy; that is, I worked in the kitchen. My pay was seven rubles a month, and I worked under the cook.

The steward, so fat he looked bloated, was bald as a billiard ball. With his hands folded behind his back, he paced the deck all day long, like an uncomfortable bear, feeling the sultry heat, and hunting for some shade. His wife's beat was the buffet. A woman touching forty, she was still personable, though faded. Her powder makeup was so heavy it flaked off her cheeks, depositing a greasy white dust on her print dress.

Ruler of the kitchen was the fancy chef, Ivan Medveizhenok, a short, plump fellow with an arched nose, and ironic little eyes. A dandy, he shaved every morning, and wore starched collars. His cheeks had a bluish hue, and his black moustaches took an upward twirl; he devoted every spare moment to them, working on them with sooty fingers before a pocket mirror.

The boat's outstanding personality was a stoker, Jake Shumov, a stocky man with a massive chest. His face was snub-nosed, and as smooth as a shovel. Thick eyebrows almost hid his coffee-colored eyes, tough, curling hair, like swamp moss, coated his cheeks; and the same sort of hair covered his head like a skullcap, through which he could barely dig his gnarled fingers.

He was a tricky card player, and greedy beyond conception. Like a famished dog, he haunted the kitchen for meat scraps and bones. He took tea with Medveizhenok, to whom he recounted fantastic memoirs. As a youth he had been apprenticed to the town shepherd of Riazan; later, having been recruited by an itinerant monk, he put in a four-year stint at a monastery.

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"And I would have turned monk, one of God's black stars," he commented, in his pert, humorous way, "had not a female pilgrim from Penza happened along. That diverting creature overthrew me. 'Here you are, a nice husky lad; and here am I, a lonely, respectable widow. How about coming along with me?' she proposes, 'I've got a house of my own where I do a business in down and feathers.' That sounded all right to me, and I joined up with her. I was her boy friend, and for three years we lived as cozily as bread in the oven."

"What a liar!" Medveizhenok interjected, worriedly inspecting a boil on his nose. "If lies could earn you money, you'd have thousands in the bank."

Jake's response was an indistinct murmuring, and a slight tremor among the bristling, blue hair covering his flat face and the tips of his shaggy moustache; then, the chef's remark having been passed over, he continued his fluent recital: "Being older than me, I began to find her a bit stale; so I hooked up with her niece; and when she found out, she took me by the scruff of the neck, and showed me the door."

"Just what you deserved," commented the cook, as evenly as Jake himself.

The stoker ignored the interjection. Sucking at a lump of sugar in his cheek, he said, "I was all up in the air, but I ran into an old peddler from Vladimir. With him I tramped the roads of the world. We crossed the Balkan Mountains into Turkey, Romania, Greece and all over Austria-Hungary; a whole row of nations. Wherever we got wind of a customer, there we were to show our wares."

"And steal a thing or two?" asked the chef, seriously.

"Certainly not; I'd been warned by the old man, 'You have to be honest abroad; they're so strict there, I hear; it's off with your head for a little nothing.' I admit I tried to get away with a little something, but it didn't pay. There was a horse I succeeded in leading out of a certain merchant's yard; but I got no farther when I was caught, given a beating, and hauled to the police station. I had a partner, a real horse-thief, but I just did it for fun. I'd been doing some repairs in the merchant's house, rigging up a stove to heat his bath. He took sick and had some nightmares, in which I figured; so he took fright and

said to the magistrate, 'Please let him go'—him meaning me—'please let him go; he's given me nightmares; if you don't, you'll come down sick. He must be a wizard!' That meant me, imagine!—a wizard. Now, that merchant happened to have pull, so I was let off."

"I wouldn't have let you off," remarked the chef. "I should have put you to soak in water to wash out some of your foolishness."

Jake pounced upon these words. "I know I'm full of folly—enough to stock a village."

Putting a finger under his collar with an angry jerk to ease its pressure, the chef said in vexation, "Nonsense! It's more than I can understand how a ne'er-do-well like you gets along, stuffs himself, guzzles, promenades over the whole earth! What good are you, I'd like to know?"

Calmly chewing away, the stoker replied, "I'd like to know, too. I get along, and that's all I can tell you. One man takes to his bed, and another walks, and a *chinovnik* sits all day; but everybody has to eat."

This infuriated the chef still more. "You're an unspeakable swine, really. Hog's swill——"

"What are you sore about?" asked Jake wonderingly. "Men are all acorns off the one oak. No point hollering at me; that won't improve me, you know."

I was immediately taken by this man whom I gazed at with endless amazement and listened to, open-mouthed. I sensed that his knowledge of life reached deep. He used the intimate forms of address to everybody, captain, steward, the haughtiest first-class passengers, and sailors, waiters, deck passengers, as if he were on an equal footing with everybody.

Called before the captain or the engineer, to answer for some negligence or for cheating at cards, he would stand there listening, his baboon-like hands behind his back. It was obvious, even as he listened, that he was unconcerned, and not in the least intimidated by threats of firing him at the next stop. He gave the impression of the eternal outsider, as had Good Idea. He appeared conscious of his singularity, and that he baffled people.

I cannot recall this man to have taken offense at anything,

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or to have held his tongue any length of time. Involuntarily, as it appeared, a constant stream of talk gushed from his coarse lips. Even when he was taking a scolding, or listening to an anecdote, his lips were in motion, either repeating what was being said to him, or just talking to himself. Regularly, when his work was done, he emerged from the stokehold barefoot, dripping perspiration and smeared with oil; no belt around his damp blouse, which was open, leaving his hairy chest exposed; and the same instant, his steady, resonant, monotonous voice would reach across the deck, his words as continuous as rain.

"Greetings to you, mother. And where are you bound? Cris-topol? I know the town; been there, too. Lived there with a well-to-do Tatar; name of Usan Gubaidulin. Had three wives, the old boy. Rugged he was, red-complexioned, and one wife was young. Amusing she was, that little Tatar wench."

He had been all over and, seemingly, had fornicated with every woman he had encountered. He spoke about people serenely, without a touch of animosity, as if he had never suffered injury or insult.

Soon after, his voice would echo from the stern, "How about it, folks; how about a game of cards? Just a shuffle, eh? Cheer you up a bit. Make money sitting down; there's a profitable occupation, eh?"

I observed that he never described things as good, bad or dreadful; his adjectives were "cheering," "amusing," "odd." A beautiful woman reduced down to "an amusing little female," and fine weather to "a cheering little day." His most frequent expression, however, was "I spit on it!"

He was considered an idler, but as far as I could see, he toiled as responsibly as the other stokers in that smothering, fetid hell-hole; and I never heard complaints from him, as from the rest, of exhaustion and heat.

One day an old woman passenger was robbed of her purse. The night was clear and still; and people's tempers were concordantly amiable. The captain contributed five rubles to make good her loss, and the passengers took up a collection. On receiving the money, the old woman crossed herself, bowed low, and explained, "But, kind friends, it's three greven (thirty kopeks) over."

"Take it, good woman. Take all there is," someone replied cheerfully. "No such thing as having anything over."

Jake, however, asked the old woman quite soberly, "Let me have the overs for a card stake." Everybody around laughed, but he kept at the bewildered woman. "Come on now, woman, let me have it; what good will the money do you? Tomorrow you'll be in the graveyard."

He was driven away with imprecations, at which he said to me, wonderingly, "How ridiculous people are! It's none of their business! Why do they have to butt in? She, herself, said she didn't want all of it. And the three greven would have been a comfort to me."

The very look of money gave him pleasure. As he talked, he would polish coins on his trousers till they gleamed; and his eyebrows twitched as he held them, between his gnarled fingers, before his snubnose. Yet, he was not stingy.

He once got me into a card game I didn't know; and he cried out in astonishment, "How is it you don't know? And you consider yourself educated! You'll have to learn. We'll start playing for lumps of sugar."

I lost half a pound of the finest sugar to him, every lump of which went into his shaggy cheeks. As soon as he thought I knew the game, he said, "Now let's play for money. Have you got any?"

"Five rubles."

Understandably enough, my five rubles changed hands. Burning to recoup, I staked my jacket, valued at five rubles, and lost it; then, my new shoes—another loss. At this, Jake said with reluctance, and almost with irritation, "No, you don't understand the game yet; you get too excited. You have to throw in everything, down to your shoes. Here you are, take back your clothes and your money—only I'll keep a ruble as my instructor's fee. Is that a go?"

I expressed my gratitude. "I spit on it," he replied. "A game's for fun, you understand; but you want to turn it into a fight. And even in a fight, it's no good boiling over. You have to be able to measure your punches. What's the use of getting into a lather? You're a kid; you have to learn control. So you don't win the first try, or the fifth; so it's the seventh time,

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then you spit on it! Go and cool off, and then try it again. That's playing the game."

I took increasing pleasure in his company; nevertheless, he also grated upon me. In some of his anecdotes he reminded me of grandma; and there was much else in him that drew me to him. But his ingrained apathy filled me with aversion.

Once, near sundown, a second-class passenger, a fat, drunken business man from Perm, fell overboard, and the ruddy-gold current quickly carried the struggling man away. The steam was shut off; the ship was stopped; under the red rays of the sun the spray jetting from the wheel looked like blood. Already a good distance from the boat, the dark shape fought for life in the frothing, blood-red cauldron. His outcries were carried back to us; they shook one to the core. Answering screams came from the passengers, colliding into each other as they swarmed over the deck and crowded into the stern. The friend of the man overboard, a ruddy, bald chap who was also drunk, hit everybody within reach, bellowing, "Out of my way; I'll get him!"

Two sailors had already dived in and were swimming toward the drowning man; and boats, too, had been lowered. Through the ringing orders of the captain and the screams of the women, Jake's steady, composed, resonant voice could be heard. "He'll drown; he's bound to, seeing that he has all his clothes on. With all his clothes on, he's bound to go under. Take women, for example. Why do they always go under quicker than men? It's their petticoats. They drag a woman straight down to the bottom, like weights, when she falls in. You'll see, he'll drown."

And, in fact, the business man did drown. For two hours they kept looking for him, but he had disappeared. Now sober, his friend sat on deck, wheezing and mumbling mournfully, "We're almost home. What'll happen when we arrive? He had a family; what'll they say?"

Taking up his hands-behind-his-back stance, Jake tried to console him. "You're worrying yourself over nothing. Who knows when he's fated to die? One man eats mushrooms and is poisoned and dies; thousands of others eat mushrooms and

thrive on them. But one man dies. And what about the mushrooms?"

Stocky and powerful, he stood there before the business man like a boulder, and poured words over him like grain. For a time the business man wept, without a word, brushing his tears out of his beard with his big hands; but after a time he belledow, "Stop torturing me! Fellow Christians, there'll be a murder if you don't get him away!"

Jake went off, undisconcerted. "People are funny; you go do them a kindness and they curse you for it."

At times I considered the stoker a dimwit, but more frequently, I felt his stupidity to be put on. I tried to get a straight account from him of his youth and his trampings over the earth, with unexpected results. His head back, and his dark, coppery eyes asquint, he drew his hand across his mossy face and said, with an indolent drawl, "People all over, brother, are no wiser than ants. And where you have people you have trouble, let me tell you! The most of them, naturally, are peasants. The earth is just littered with *mujiks*, like autumn leaves, as the saying goes. I've seen the Bulgars and also the Greeks and those, what d'ye call them, the Serbs, and Romanians besides, and all sorts of Gypsies. Are there different sorts? What are they like? What do you mean? In towns, they're townspeople. They're alike in lots of ways. There are even those who speak our language, though poorly, as for instance the Tatars and the Mordvins. The Greeks can't. They jabber whatever they fancy, and it sounds like words, but what it is or what it's about, is beyond our understanding. You have to use sign language with them. But my old man could make himself understood even to the Greeks! He'd mumble something, and they got it. A sly one he was. He knew how to put it over on them. You still want to know the sort they were? You're a funny one! What sort of people are people? Dark, of course, and the Romanians, too, and they all have the same religion. The Bulgars are dark, too; but their religion is the same as ours. And the Greeks are the same as Turks, in origin."

I felt he was holding something back, something he didn't

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care to speak about. From the magazine pictures I knew that the capital of Greece was Athens, a town of great beauty and antiquity. But Jake shook his head and cast doubt on the idea.

"They've been filling you with lies, my friend. Athens? There's no such place; but there's a place called Athos; but that's not a town, just a hill with a monastery on top. It's called Holy Mount Athos. An old man used to sell pictures of it. There's a town on the Danube River called Belgrade; it's like Yaroslavl, or Nizhny, the way it's built. There's nothing special about their towns, but there's something different about their villages. And their women, it's enough to kill you, they're so agreeable. I nearly settled down there on account of one of them. Now, what the devil was her name?"

As he rubbed his sweating face, his bristles crackled. From somewhere deep down came a drumroll of a laugh. "Ah, how a man can forget! And, to think of it, she and I were—. When we parted she wept and I wept, too." And off-handedly, and without a trace of reticence, he gave me instruction in the ways of a man with a woman.

We were on deck. The tepid moonlight night floated toward us; the shore meadows were barely visible beyond the gleaming waters. In the heavens twinkled yellow stars—stars drawn to the earth. There was a stir all around, a quiet, but incessant, pulsing of life, real life. And, into this agreeably melancholy stillness, struck his hoarse voice, "And so, letting go of each other's hands, we parted."

Jake's tales were not to any prude's taste, yet they were not obscene, being neither vicious nor exhibitionistic, and with a naïve and mournful minor note in them. I was as touched by the innocently naked moon, which filled me with incomprehensible longings. My mind clung to what it had found good, the dearest thing that had come into my life, Queen Margot, and those lines, so true and memorable: "A song has need of beauty, but beauty has no need of song."

Shaking myself free of these reveries, as if rousing myself from a nap, I called upon the stoker again for recollections of his life and his travails.

"You're funny, you know," he responded. "What's there to tell? I've been around. Was I in a monastery? Yes. Taverns?

Yes. How the peasants live and how the gentry live; I've seen both. I know what it is to be full and what it is to be hungry."

And, picking his way over his past, as if it were a precarious rickety bridge over a deep river, he went on, "Take the time I was stuck in the police station over that horse theft. I'm sure bound for Siberia," I thought to myself, and then the police captain starts beefing about a smoky oven over in his house. So I said to him, 'I can fix that for you, your honor.' He waves me away. 'It has baffled the best workmen here.' So I tell him, 'It happens, sometimes, a shepherd gets the best of a general.' I felt bold; I could have faced up to anybody, with Siberia ahead of me; what did I care? 'O.K., try it,' he says, 'but I'll break your neck if it smokes worse than before!' It took me two days and wasn't that police captain stunned! 'Oh, you dummy, you dope! A master workman, and you have to go horse stealing! How come?' I explained it to him, 'That was only a prank, your honor.' 'So it seems,' he said. 'Just a prank. Too bad. Yes, too bad,' he said it over again. You see, there he was, a ruthless police captain and all that, and he sympathized with me."

"So what happened?" I asked.

"Nothing. He sympathized with me! What more?"

"What's the point of sympathizing with a stone like you?"

Jake laughed genially. "You funny guy! So it's a stone? Well, one can have sympathy for stones. There's a place for stones, too; they make paving for streets. There's no material of any sort one can't have feelings about; it has a place of its own, and not by accident. What's dirt? But out of it comes the grass."

When he went on like this, I realized the stoker understood things that were beyond my reach.

"What's your opinion of the chef?" I asked.

"Medveizhenok?" said Jake, reflectively. "What's there to think of him? Nothing."

That was a fact. Medveizhenok was so frictionlessly proper, no thought could take hold there. The only interesting thing about him was that he was fond of the stoker, though he was always reprimanding him. He was always inviting him to tea.

Once he told Jake, "If you'd been a serf of mine, you lazy-

bones, you'd have gotten seven thrashings a week!" And Jake replied, with all seriousness, "That's too much!"

Although the chef was forever upbraiding the stoker, he nevertheless kept feeding him tidbits. He'd toss him something, and say rudely, "Here's something for you to wolf down!"

Calmly eating it, Jake would reply, "With your help, I'm building up reserves of strength."

"And what good is strength to you, you loafer?"

"What good? Why, it'll lengthen my life!"

"What for; you're no use to anybody."

"Useless people keep living, just the same. It's fun living, isn't it? Very convenient."

"What an imbecile!"

"Why say that?"

"Im-be-cile!"

"What a way to talk!" said Jake, astonished, while Medvezhenok turned to me to say, "Imagine! We stand around the stoves, in the hellish heat, our blood drying out and the marrow frying out of our bones, while this pig stuffs himself!"

"We each fulfill our destiny," said the stoker, between mouthfuls.

I was well aware that stoking furnaces was harder and hotter work than tending cook stoves, for I had made several tries; and it puzzled me that he didn't pass on this fact to the chef. It was clear this man's thinking was all his own.

He caught it from everybody—captain, engineer, mate—who must all have known he wasn't lazy. I found it baffling. How come they so misjudged him? His fellow stokers treated him better, though they kidded him about his loquaciousness and his weakness for cards.

I asked them, "What do you think of Jake? Is he a good sort?"

"Jake? Nothing wrong with him. But you can't get a rise of him, no matter if you heaped live coals on his chest."

With all his long hours in the boiler room and the horse's hunger he had to appease, the stoker did with little sleep. There were times when, not bothering to change from his work clothes, all sweaty and dirty as he was, he was up all night chatting or playing cards with the passengers.

For me he was a locked chest, secreting something I had to get at, and I stubbornly kept at him for the key.

"What are you after? I can't make it out, little brother," he would exclaim, with a glance at me from eyes almost buried under his eyebrows. "So, I've knocked around everywhere, so what? You're a funny guy. Better let me tell you what happened to me, once."

And he embarked on a tale about a tubercular young lawyer he had run across, in a town he had stopped in, whose robust, childless German wife was languishing over a drygoods dealer. But this man had a beautiful wife and three children. Learning of the German woman's infatuation for him, he decided to play a trick on her. He fixed up a rendezvous at night in the garden, and brought along two friends, whom he hid behind the hedges. Think of it! And when that German dame arrived, he announced, "Here she is; all yours." And he explained to her: "I'm no good for you; I'm a married man. But I'm making it up to you with my two friends; one's a widower and the other's a bachelor."

"Oh, did that German woman give it to him—a smack that knocked him over a bench, and then she dug her heel into his numskull and his homely mug. I'd brought her there; I was her janitor. I was peeping through a crack in the fence, and I saw how the soup was boiling over. The two in the bushes jumped out and grabbed her by the hair, so I hopped over the fence and got her clear of them. 'That's not done, misters,' I told them. The lady had gone there in good faith and he thought ill of her. I got her away, but with a hole in my head from a brick they shied at me. The woman was so mortified, she was frantic. 'The minute my husband dies, I'm going back to my own German folk.' 'That's right, you should,' I told her. 'You've got to go back to them.' And so she did, soon as the lawyer died. A good-hearted sort she was, and smart, too. And the lawyer, God rest his soul, he was a good-hearted sort, too."

I wasn't sure I had quite gotten the point of the story, so I said nothing. I had a sense of something known, something experienced before, something ruthless and blind in what he reported.

"That was a good story, eh?" asked Jake.

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I made some confused protest and, in his neutral way, this is how he put it. "People who have more than they need look for amusement; but there are times when their horseplay isn't fun; doesn't come off according to plan. Business calls for brains, and business men, of course, are brainy people; but they're too clever; life becomes dull for them; so they look for amusement."

Ahead of the bow foamed the river; we could hear the rushing current and see the shores gliding alongside. Passengers snored on the deck. Silently weaving her way around benches and prostrate sleepers, a tall, sallow woman in black, her gray head bare, approached us. With a nudge the stoker whispered to me, "She's in trouble, see." And I felt that other people's troubles amused him.

I was an eager listener, and he told me many tales which I remember very well. But I don't recall one that was cheerful. He spoke more coolly than did people in books. In books I was often aware of the writer's emotions, anger, pleasure, sorrow, sarcasm; but the stoker was never sarcastic, never passed judgments. Nothing stirred him, either to rapture or disgust. He spoke like an indifferent witness in a courtroom, who felt alien to all, judge, plaintiff, and defendant alike. This insentience disappointed me increasingly, and my feeling toward him turned into active dislike.

Life was no different to him than the flame that heated the boilers. He stood before the furnace with a mallet in his pitted, coffee-colored hands, and lightly tapped the tip of the gauge to raise or lower the temperature.

"Hasn't all this hurt you?"

"Who could hurt me? I'm strong. The punches I can hand out!"

"I'm not thinking of punches. Hasn't it hurt your soul?"

"You can't hurt the soul; nothing can injure it!" he replied. "Souls are invulnerable to human powers, to anything outside them!"

In the talk of the passengers, the sailors, of everybody as a matter of fact, the word "soul" was as common as land, work, food and women. "Soul" is the tenth word in the conversation of ordinary people, a word that quivers with life and move-

ment. But it troubled me to hear it roll so easily off slippery tongues. And when it was defiled by the peasants, in obscenities, I was cut to the heart.

I recalled with what care grandma mentioned the soul, that inner repository of love and grace and happiness. When a good person died, I thought, angels in white took up his soul to grandma's good God and he gave it a tender welcome. "Ah, my dear, immaculate one, what miseries you have borne below!" And the soul would receive from Him the pinions of a seraph, six white wings. Jake referred to the soul as circumspectly and as infrequently as grandma. When he was bawled out he never retorted blasphemously; when others prated about the soul he was silent, his red, bull neck bowed. I asked him about the nature of the soul, and he told me, "God's breath, that's what the soul is."

Not feeling much enlightened by that I wanted more; at which the stoker, with a sidelong twist of his head, told me, "Of the soul even the priests have little understanding. That, little brother, is a secret matter."

I kept thinking about him, had an exasperated determination to understand him; but to no avail. And, in the meanwhile, I could look at nothing else; his stocky frame blotted out everything else.

The stewardess showed me a dubious good will. I was assigned to fetch her hot water for her morning ablutions, although this was properly the chore of jolly little Lucy, the second-class chambermaid.

Standing near the stewardess in her cabin cubicle, where she stood bare to the waist, I looked at her yellow body, doughy like half-baked pies, and, remembering Queen Margot's supple, tawny figure, I felt nauseated. And the stewardess kept jabbering away, complaining, scoffing, scolding.

I missed the intent of her words, though I had a dim sense of its debased and pitiful character. But I remained untroubled. I was beyond her reach, beyond everything that happened on that boat. I had shut myself off from the world, behind rugged, protecting rock. Whatever transpired those days and nights drifted off into infinity.

"Our Gabriela's infatuated with you," came with Lucy's

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laughter, like something heard in a dream. "Open your mouth for your happiness."

And she wasn't alone in kidding me; the whole dining room staff was aware of the stewardess' frailty. The chef remarked, scowling, "The woman's had a bite of everything; now her mouth's watering for cookies. Such people! You, Peshkov, watch your step!"

And Jake also advised me like a father. "Now, if you were a bit older I'd speak to you differently; but, at your age, it's wiser to hold off. However, you must follow your own inclination."

I said, "Shut up! It's disgusting!"

"Sure it is."

But, immediately after, his fingers plucking at a hair, trying to unkink it, he said in a solemn, profound way, "Now, one should also look at it from her viewpoint. Her work is harassing. If a dog wants to be patted, think how much more people want it. And a female lives on love, the way a mushroom lives on dampness. Sure, it's a disgrace; but what can she do?"

Trying to fix his evasive eyes, I looked at him and said, "Then you'd deny her that?"

"What's she to me, my mother? And even then—you're a funny guy!" And his laugh rattled like a drum. There were times when, looking at him, I felt myself toppling through space, down to a dim, silent, bottomless pit.

"Jake, everybody except you has a wife; why did you never marry?"

"Me? A pet of all the women, thank the Lord! You see, it's this way. When you marry you have to settle down, live on one patch of earth. My patch is small and poor and even that's grabbed up by our uncle. When my younger brother gets back from his army service, he and the uncle have an argument, and he's taken to court for clouting the uncle on the head—a bit of blood was spilt in that affair; for which he gets eighteen months in jail; and from jail only one road lies ahead, which leads you right back there. Such a nice, young woman his wife was—but what's there to say? In marriage a man must be boss of the stable; but for a soldier, even his life is not his own."

"Do you pray?"

"You funny guy; of course!"

"How do you pray?"

"Lots of ways."

"What sort of prayers?"

"Well, here's the night prayer, brother. I just say, 'Lord, Jesus, have mercy on me, living; and rest me, when I die. Keep sickness from me, Lord'—and there's a couple of other things I say."

"Such as what?"

"Oh, a couple of things. Even the things you don't say reach Him."

Toward me he acted with a kindly, but amused, curiosity, as with a smart kitten that could be put through tricks. There were nights when, as I sat with him, in the reek that came from him of kerosene, burnt oil and onions, which he ate raw as others ate apples, he would suddenly demand, "Come on, Alex, my boy, some poetry."

I knew many verses by heart and, in addition, I kept a fat notebook into which I transcribed poems I fancied. I read him "Ruslan," to which he listened, motionless, like a mute, holding in his snorting breath. After it he commented, in a low voice, "Now, that's a nice, sweet little story. You didn't make it up? There's some gentleman I ran across, named Mukhin Pushkin."

"But he was killed a long time ago."

"How come?"

I told him the story briefly, as I had gotten it from Queen Margot; Jake's nonchalant comment was, "Women ruin lots of people."

I told him similar tales from books I had read. The stories fermented in my mind into one continuous, bubbling stream of tumultuous and lovely lives, illuminated by blazing passions. Acts of senseless derring-do, blue-blood hauteur, fabulous heroics, deaths, duels, purple language, and meannesses, all stream together. Rokambol got mixed up with the chivalrous Lia Molia and Hannibal; Louis XI assumed the shape of Père Grandet, Lieutenant Otletayev that of Henry IV. In this narrative world of mine, in which I transposed characters and events to suit my fancy, I had sport with people as capriciously as

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grandpa's God. It didn't keep me from facing reality; nor did it weaken my urge to know living people; but this nebulous book life interposed a transparent, but impervious cloud, immunizing me against much of the contagious smuts and virulent poisons of life. Books helped me to meet many evils without taking harm. My observations of human love and anguish kept me from whorehouses. Those who found debased pleasure sweet aroused my aversion and pity. Rokambol helped me to a stoical indifference to circumstance. Dumas' heroes made me seek to emulate their self-dedication to noble causes. The merry monarch, Henry IV, was my favorite, the hero, it seemed to me, of Beranger's splendid verses: "He lightened the tax load of the peasants, and he loved his glass; for when his people live merrily, may not the King drink?"

According to the novels Henry was a good sort, close to his people. I thought of him as a sun; and he made me feel that France, the world's loveliest land, the realm of chivalry, was just as glorious, whether symbolized by a man in royal robes or a peasant's homespun. Ange Pitou was no less the knight than D'Artagnan. The passages on Henry's murder brought tears to my eyes, and I gnashed my teeth in rage against Ravaillac. In my stories to the stoker, the king was generally the hero, and Jake seemed to share my affection for France and "Khenry."

"A good man, that King Khenry," he said, "putting down rebels or anything else."

No interjected comments, no questions came from him to interrupt my recital; he was a silent listener, his eyelids almost shut, his expression unchanging, like a mossy stone. But should I pause, for any reason, he would immediately inquire, "Finished?"

"Not yet."

"Then what are you stopping for?"

Of the French people he commented, sighing, "They had it easy!"

"In what way?"

"Look, you and I have to bear this heat, and work hard, while they lolled around, doing nothing but drinking and strolling—a very comfortable life."

"But they had to work too."

"Where does it say that in your stories!" demanded the stoker; and I was made suddenly aware that, in most of my reading, there had scarcely ever been a mention of toil or ordinary hardships to inconvenience the heroes.

"Now, I'm going to doze off a bit," said Jake, and, stretching out where he was, was soon placidly asore.

In the autumn, when the shores of the Kama were reddening, leaves were turning gold, and the slanting rays of the sun were paling, Jake startled us by quitting his job. The very day previously, he had made these plans with me, "Day after tomorrow, boy, we'll be in Perm. We'll steam ourselves all we like in a bath, and afterwards we'll go off, you and I, to an inn, where there's music and things are pleasant. It's nice watching the machine play."

But at Sarapulia, a fat man with a sagging, beardless, effeminate face came aboard. His womanish look was accentuated by his cozy, voluminous cloak and his cap, with fox fur earlaps. Right off he picked himself a table where he would be enveloped in the warm gusts from the kitchen, ordered tea, and could not get at the boiling yellow fluid soon enough. He neither loosened his cloak nor took off his cap and was, consequently, soon in a heavy sweat.

A thin rain distilled from the autumnal fog. This man, as he swabbed at the perspiration with his handkerchief, gave me the impression that the rain was slackening; but as he began perspiring again, it seemed to rain harder.

Jake joined him, and they scanned a map together. The passenger pointed to something, but Jake exclaimed, "There? That's nothing! I spit on it!"

"Very well," said the passenger, and stowed the map away in a leather case he held on his knees. They had tea together and an intimate talk.

Before Jake went down to his boilers, I asked him about this man. He answered, laughing, "Might be a pigeon by his looks. A eunuch is what he is, from far off in Siberia! An amusing chap; lives in a colony."

He thumped his blackened heels, tough as hooves, on the deck, paused again, and scratched himself. "I'm taking a job

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with him. At Perm I'll get off and bid you good-by, my lad. We'll go part of the way by train, then by water again, and after that on horseback. It'll take us five weeks to reach the man's colony."

"Do you know him?" I asked, startled by his sudden decision.

"How could I? I've never seen him before, never lived within sight of him."

The following morning Jake came forth, togged out in a greasy fur jacket, with sandals on his bare feet, and Medvezhenok's battered and brimless straw hat on his head. He gripped my arm as with iron, and said, "How about coming along? That pigeon'll take you, too; just tell him you want to. How about it? Shall I ask him? They'll rid you of something you don't need, and pay you for it. They have a feast when they castrate a man and make it worth his while."

The eunuch,²³ a white package under his arm, stared at Jake with dull, bulging, leaden eyes, like those of a corpse pulled out of the water. I cursed him in a low voice, and once again the stoker gripped my arm. "Let him be. He's harmless. Everybody has his own belief. Is it any concern of ours? Well, so long! Good luck!"

And Jacob Shumov went off, waddling like a bear, leaving my heart perplexed and restless. I grieved at the loss of my stoker, and resented him for it. I felt a bit of jealousy, as I recall, and I pondered, awed, "Imagine a man setting out like that, not knowing where and to what!"

Ah, what sort of man was Jacob Shumov?

²³ The Skoptsy, a sect of Old Believers, whose members, in order to achieve complete sexual abstinence, resorted to castration.

Chapter Twelve

LATER THAT AUTUMN, WHEN THE NAVIGATION SEASON ENDED, I was apprenticed to an icon painter. It took only a day or two to hear from the owner of the shop, a good-natured old woman, rather fond of the bottle, this announcement, in her Vladimir dialect: "Now, the days are short and the evenings grow longer; so, by day you'll help out in the shop. You'll learn at night."

And so my new boss turned out to be the manager of the shop, a young man with a handsome, calculating face. In the chill and dimness of the dawn, I used to cross the town with him, up the quiet business street, to the Fair grounds where, on the second floor of the bazaar building, set back to form a sort of arcade, the shop was located. It had formerly been a storeroom and was, consequently, dark. It had one small, iron-barred window, and an iron door. The shop was stocked with different sized icons and icon frames and books in polished yellow leather, stamped with a grape design, printed in Slavonic.²⁴ Next to our shop was another, dealing in the same wares, icons and religious books, and run by a black-bearded shopkeeper, related to an appraiser of such religious goods, who belonged to the sect of the Old Believers.²⁵ The reputation of this expert extended over the Volga region to the borders of Kerzhensk. The shopkeeper was assisted by a thin, spry son with a little, oldish face and shifty, mouselike eyes.

After opening the shop, I hurried to a nearby inn for some boiling water. Breakfast over, I had to put the shop in order,

²⁴ The classic language of the church ritual.

²⁵ The *Raskolniki* (Old Believers) refused to accept certain revisions in the sacramental literature and in the icon imagery, instituted in the reign of Tsar Alexis by the Patriarch Nikon. Religious dissent in Russia found its chief expression in this sect which proliferated into many sub-sects.

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dust around, and then stand in the arcade outside, to steer customers from our competitor's store into ours.

"Customers are dopes," the young shopkeeper impressed upon me. "They don't care where they trade, so long as they get a bargain. They don't appreciate the value of the goods."

Giving the wooden edge of an icon a tap, he displayed his superficial trade knowledge for my instruction. "Here's a nice job—cheap, too—doesn't need a stand—three or four *vershoks*²⁶ high. And here's another, doesn't need a stand—six or seven *vershoks*. Are you up on the Saints? Keep in mind that Boniface helps against drunkenness, and the Holy Martyr Barbara, against toothache and fatal accidents; and Basil, The Blessed, against fevers. Are you up on the madonnas? Here's the Madonna of Sorrows, the three-armed Madonna, and the renowned Madonna of Abalatzk; and the Mourn Me Not Mother Madonna; and the Soothe My Grief Madonna, and the Madonna of Kazan, and the Madonna of Pokrov, and the Madonna of the Seven Wounds."

Soon I had by heart the prices of the icons, which were fixed according to size and detail, and I learned to distinguish between the different madonnas; but the diverse functions of the Saints were harder for me to keep in mind.

I might be standing at the shop door, daydreaming, when my boss would quiz me, "What Saint lightens the birth pangs?" And, if I replied amiss, he would fume, "What do you use your head for?"

Hardest of all was my role as puller-in. I, myself, saw nothing pleasing in the daubed icons, and had no urge to foist them on others. From grandma's stories I had brought away the image of a gentle and beautiful Madonna, similar to those represented in the art magazines; but on these icons she was a harsh, old woman with a long, hooked nose and stiff hands.

Our busy days were the market days—Wednesdays and Fridays. Peasants, old women, sometimes whole families, trooped down the arcade, all Old Believers from Zavolzh, morose and wary forest folk. I would spy a bulky man in homespun and sheepskins approaching hesitantly, or even apprehensively,

²⁶A *vershok* is 1.7 inches.

and, overcoming my own embarrassment and reluctance, I would finally bring myself to accost him. I was clumsy at it, and as he twisted in his heavy boots, I would drone my spiel, "How can we serve you, your honor? We have annotated psalters and the works of Ephraim Sirin and Kyrillov, and the canonical literature and breviaries. You're welcome to browse around. And icons, a large assortment, whatever you're looking for, at different prices. All first-class work, dark colors! Or made to your order, any Saint or Madonna you specify; for a birthday gift or for your home. Finest shop in Russia, finest goods in town!"

Expressionless and imperturbable, the customer would make no response until suddenly, with an arm like a block of wood, he would jostle me out of his way and enter our competitor's door; and my boss, pulling at his big ears, would grumble, irritably, "So, you let him get away; a fine salesman you are!"

And from the next shop would issue a syrupy voice that had a druglike power, "Our wares are not sheepskins or boots, my friend, but God's priceless grace, which is more precious than silver or gold."

"What a devil!" my boss would whisper, livid with envy and exasperation. "A plague on that peasant's eyes! You'll have to learn! You'll have to learn!"

I did my best to learn, for one should do whatever he must as well as he can. But I was no success, either as a puller-in or as salesman. These surly, laconic men, these ratlike old women, always so diffident and abject, somehow aroused my compassion; and my impulse was to disclose the real price and spare them the couple of greven that had been tacked on.

Their connoisseurship in books and icon art astounded me. A gray-haired old man, whom I had steered into the shop one day, informed me curtly, "No, my boy, this is not the best icon maker in Russia, Rogozhin's in Moscow is the best."

Bewildered, I stood aside to let him go and he went on, passing our competitor's shop as well.

"You let him go?" exclaimed my boss.

"You never said anything to me about the Rogozhin workshop."

He raged on. "These quiet ones! There's nothing they don't

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know, a plague on them! They're on to everything, the dogs!"

The sleek, overfed egotist hated the peasants. At his best moments he was all complaints. "Here I am, a man of brains, a clean person, who uses perfumes and incense and cologne water; but, though I value myself so highly, I have to bow and scrape to a peasant in order to wheedle five kopecks from him for the old woman! Is that justice? After all, what's a peasant? A parcel of smelly wool, a louse, and here—" And he lapsed into aggrieved silence.

I liked the peasants, who mystified me as Jake had done.

Sometimes a miserable-looking figure would clump into the shop, remove a shaggy cap, cross himself with two fingers, try to avoid looking at the unblessed icons, as his eyes turned to the glimmering lamp in the icon corner. And, after staring around, wordless for some time, he would finally ask for "an annotated psalter."

Tucking up his coat sleeves, he would pore over the pages, clumsily thumbing them, and gnawing at his lips.

"Nothing older?"

"An old one would come to a thousand rubles, you know."

"I know."

Moistening a finger to turn a page, his touch left a dark print on the margin. My boss, with a murderous look at the back of his head, said, "The Holy Scriptures don't age; God's word doesn't alter."

"That we know about. That we've heard before. God did not alter it, but Nikon²⁷ did." And, silently, shutting the book, he went out.

My boss sometimes got into disputes with these forest folk, who obviously knew the sacred writings better than he, drawing from him the exclamation, "Outlandish heathen!"

I observed that, though any new volume was in disfavor with these peasants, they nevertheless regarded it with respect, handling it like a bird that might soar up out of their grasp. This gave me pleasure to see, for a book was magic to me, too.

²⁷ The Patriarch Nikon, reformer of the Orthodox Church liturgy. Nikon subsequently suffered persecution for his opposition to Tsar Alexis' state control of the Church.

It held the writer's soul, which spoke to me personally, when I opened the book and set it free.

Many old men and women came in to sell old books of pre-Nikon times, or beautiful copies made in the monasteries of Irgiz and Kerzhentz. They also brought missals free of the revisions by Dmitry Rostovsky; and icons bearing ancient inscriptions, and crosses, and diptych-icons, hinged and mounted in brass; and silver eucharist spoons presented as mementoes by the princes of Muscovy. These were offered furtively; they came from hoards secreted under floorboards.

Both my boss and his competitor were on the lookout for such business, and tried to lure the seller from each other. On resale, such antiques, purchased for anything up to ten rubles, would fetch hundreds from wealthy Old Believers.

"Watch for these werewolves, these sorcerers! Keep your eyes peeled for them; they're good luck!" my boss cautioned me.

When such a man turned up, my boss sent me to fetch the appraiser, Peter Vassilich, an expert in ancient volumes, icons, and antiques of all sorts. This old man was tall, and long-bearded, like Basil the Blessed, and had shrewd eyes in a genial face. A tendon had been cut in one of his legs, so he walked stiffly, using a cane. Summer and winter alike, he wore the same light, cassocklike cloak, and an odd velvet hat, the shape of a saucepan. From his usually erect and brisk carriage, he changed, on entering the shop, to a professional, round-shouldered stoop, sighing and crossing himself and keeping up a continuous murmur of devotional words. This pretense of piety and frailness always made an impression on the seller.

"What's the trouble? Anything gone wrong?" he would inquire.

"Here's a man wants to sell an icon; says it's a Stroganov."

"What?"

"A Stroganov."

"Oh. My hearing's bad. Thus has the Lord shielded my ears against the defilements of the Nikonites!"

Removing his hat, he held out the icon, peered at the inscription from all sides, then at the knots in the wood, screwed up his eyes and muttered, "How the godless Nikonites, aware

of our love of beautiful old work, and with the devil for teacher, have set out to confuse people with forgeries! How easy it is, nowadays, to make images, no trouble at all! At first glance this might be an authentic Stroganov, or a Ustiuzh or even a Suzdal; but examine it and it turns out a forgery."

Forgery, however, was his code word for a precious rarity. By such prearranged symbols he cued my boss as to how much to offer for book or icon. "Melancholy" and "Affliction," I came to realize, signified ten rubles, "Nikon the Tiger," twenty-five. I felt ashamed, looking on, but also found it an entertaining performance, this skillful swindling by the old appraiser.

"Those Nikonites, dark progeny of Nikon the Tiger, are capable of anything, having the devil for their guide! You see, even the signature looks authentic! And the background, you'd think it was the work of one hand. But look at the face—done by a different brush. An old master, like Pimen Ushakov, heretic though he was, could do an icon all by himself; the background, the face, even the finishing, and the inscription! But the profane ones of our time can't. In the old days image-making was a sacred calling; but now they profane what should be of God into a mere art!"

Finally, laying the icon down gently, and taking up his hat, he concluded, "It's a sin!" Sin was the code word for "buy it."

Stuck in this syrupy flow and awed by the old man's erudition, the seller would ask in a deferential tone, "So what's your honor's opinion of the icon?"

"It's Nikonite handiwork."

"But it can't be! My grandfolks prayed under it."

"Nikon came before your grandfolks."

The old appraiser held the icon up in the seller's face, and exclaimed with asperity, "Just look at that unseemly expression of joy! Call that an icon! It's a soulless picture, just an art work, a Nikonite trick! Here am I, an old man, suffering persecution for the truth, and soon to face God—would I withhold the truth from you?"

And he would step from the shop out into the arcade, looking enfeebled by age, and affronted by having his judgment questioned. My boss got the image for a few rubles, and the

seller, on his departure, bowed low to the old appraiser on the terrace; and I went off to the inn to fetch boiling water for tea. On my return, I would find the appraiser looking spry and chipper, and rapturously going over the fine points of the icon for my boss' benefit. "Observe with what care it's been done! This is painting, done in awe of God, with the human emotions repressed."

"What master do you attribute it to?" my boss wanted to know, smiling and capering.

"Can't say yet. Let me have it and I'll show it around."

"Oh, Peter!"

"And when I'm offered a good price, you'll get fifty rubles; everything over goes to me."

"Oh!"

"Stop oh-ing!"

And the conscienceless pair haggled through their tea, watching each other, shifty-eyed. My boss was plainly under old Peter's thumb. When the appraiser was gone, my boss would warn me, "No tattling to the old woman, now, about this business."

Having exhausted the icon as a subject, my boss would ask the old man, "What's going on in town?"

Caressing his beard with his yellow fingers and his greasy lips glistening, old Peter gossiped about business people, described big deals, banquets, wealth invalids, society weddings and love affairs. He served up these dripping tidbits as artfully as a good cook serves up a dish of pancakes, with sputtering laughter for the sauce. My boss' round face darkened with envy and desire. His eyes went wistfully wide as he lamented, "Others live while I stew here!"

"Everybody's fate is appointed. For one it is rung out by angels with little silver mallets; for another, the devil does the ringing—with a sledgehammer!"

This robust, sinewy old man was in on everything in town. He had inside dope on business men, officials, the clergy and ordinary citizens. He was as sharp-sighted as a hawk and he added to that traits of the wolf and the fox. I would have liked to get him angry, but couldn't get at him; he seemed to see me

from afar, and as though through mist. I had a sense of a man insulated by space; approaching him gave me a sensation of falling. In him, too, I felt a touch of Shumov, the stoker.

Although my boss eulogized old Peter's cleverness, both in his presence and when he was out of sight, he, too, at times, felt an impulse to bait the appraiser.

"You're a swindler!" he would exclaim, glaring at old Peter. To which the latter laughingly retorted, "Only the Lord manages without fraud; and we have to spend our lives among fools. Can you deal with fools without defrauding them? What, then, would be the purpose of fools?"

My boss would fly into a rage. "The peasants aren't all fools; and where did your business men come from, if not from the peasants?"

"We're not discussing business men. Fools and rogues are different. A fool's like a saint; his brain is in a dream."

The old man's speech was an irritating drawl. He seemed to be perched, out of reach, on a dry mound in a marsh. You could not provoke him to anger. Either he was beyond wrath, or knew how to control it. Yet it was he who often picked quarrels with me. He'd come up to me, and, grinning down into his beard, would ask, "Now, what's that French writer's name—Ponoss?"

This silly horseplay of turning names upside down infuriated me but, restraining myself, I replied, "Ponson de Tarail."

"And where'd he get lost?"²⁸

"Don't fool around; you're not a child."

"True enough, I'm not a child. What writer are you reading now?"

"Ephraim Sirin."

"And who's the better writer, your foreign authors or he?" I did not answer.

"What do the foreign authors write about, mainly?"

"About everything that happens in life."

"That is, dogs and horses, whichever happens along?"

My boss laughed, and I was exasperated. I was heavy-hearted and dejected in that atmosphere. But if I tried to get away, my boss stopped me. "Where are you off to?"

²⁸ A double pun; *ponoss* means diarrhea, and *terr yat* means to lose.

And the old man would turn to quizzing me. "Now, you scholar, here's a nut to crack. Let's suppose you're standing in front of a thousand naked people, half of them men and half of them women, with Adam and Eve in their midst. How would you pick out Adam and Eve?"

He kept at me with this and, at last, triumphantly gave the answer. "Can't you see, you young fool, that since they weren't born, but created, they'd be without navels?"

The old man had a bottomless store of these nuts, on which he wore me out.

In my first days at the shop I told the boss stories from the books I had read; later they came back to me obscenely transformed. My boss regaled old Peter with them, cutting them up and giving them salacious twists. The old man expertly aided him with lewdly provocative questions. Their filthy tongues slobbered over Eugenie Grander, Ludmilla and Henry IV.

I realized they resorted to this, not out of ill-will, but as a pastime. Nevertheless, I found it hard to take. Having spewed out the filth, they made a pig's wallow of it, grunting with delight as they soiled all that had beauty and mystery, which, by those very qualities, became laughable to them.

The whole bazaar, all its business men and shopkeepers, led an unnatural life, which they filled with oafish or childish, and always vicious, amusements. They would willfully misdirect passersby who asked the way; this, indeed, had become so habitual it no longer gave them enjoyment. Having caught a pair of rats, they would tie their tails together, and then gloat over the torments of the bewildered animals as they pulled each other or turned on each other; or they would pour kerosene over the rats and watch them burn. Or they would tie a tin can to a dog's tail, and laugh as the distraught animal whirled about, howling and snapping.

They had many varieties of this kind of entertainment; they behaved, so it seemed to me, as if every sort of people—and the peasants in particular—lived solely to provide them entertainment. In their relations with people they seemed to feel only the urge to scoff at, to cause pain to, to discommode others. I found it strange that books ignored this incessant, ingrained inclination of people to humiliate one another.

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Particularly brutish and repulsive to me was the following bazaar diversion: On the street floor, just below us, was a shop selling felt boots, whose salesman had achieved city-wide notoriety for his appetite. His boss boasted of his gluttony as one might boast of the temper of a watchdog, or the endurance of a horse. He would offer bets to the neighboring shopkeepers. "Who'll lay ten rubles? Ten rubles says Misha disposes of a ten-pound ham in two hours!"

Everybody knew Misha could do it and the reply was, "We won't bet, but we'll pay for the ham to watch him eat it." And another would say, "But it must be all meat; no bones!"

After some desultory banter, there crawled forth from that dark shop a gaunt chap, with a beardless, bony face, with a long coat belted around with a band of red leather, ornamented with tassels of wool. Differentially baring his small head, he turned his dull, expressionless, deep-set eyes on his boss' pump and ruddy face and waited in silence. The latter asked in a coarse voice, "How about eating up a ham?"

"How long will I have?"

"Two hours."

"That'll be hard."

"What's hard about it?"

"Can I have a drop of beer with it?"

"All right." And then the boss would brag to the audience, "Don't think he's filling up an empty stomach. This morning he had his two pounds of bread, and then he had his regular lunch."

The ham was fetched in, and the audience settled down for the show. The tradespeople were bundled up in their heavy fur coats, like immense parcels. They were all paunchy; some were humped with fatty growths, and all had little eyes. Incurable boredom was their common affliction. They tucked their hands into their sleeves and crowded around the performer, who had an equipment of knives and wedges of rye bread. Crossing himself, he sat down on a bale of wool, laid the ham on a box beside him, and his dull eyes fixed on it in sluggish calculation.

Slicing the ham thick and the bread thin, he took a sandwich into his two hands and held it to his mouth. His lips quivered; he moistened them with his long, doglike tongue, there was a

flash of short, sharp teeth, and like a dog, he applied his muzzle to the meat.

"He's off!"

"Time him!"

All eyes fixed on the machinelike, masticating face, on the lower jaw and on the knobs near the ears; as the pointed chin went up and down, they indulged in indolent repartee.

"He's a neat feeder—like a bear!"

"Ever see a bear eating?"

"Do I live in a forest? I mean the saying, 'Gobbles like a bear.'"

"Like a pig, you mean."

"Pigs don't eat pig."

There was a reluctant snicker. Someone remarked, "Pigs eat everything—suckling pigs and their own sisters."

Gradually the eater's face darkened; his ears turned blue; his damp eyes almost popped out of their sockets; his breath came in gasps; but the movements of his chin continued as regular as before.

"Easy does it, Misha; you've got time."

He turned a worried, measuring glance on the remaining meat, took a sip of beer and munched on. The spectators grew livelier; took more frequent looks at the watch in the boss' hand, and cautioned each other. "He's probably set the hands back! let somebody else hold it! Keep your eyes on Misha, or he'll slip some meat up his sleeve. He'll never finish on time."

To which Misha's boss retorted heatedly, "Bet you a ruble! Come on, Misha!" The rest argued with him, but no one covered his bet.

And Misha ate and ate; his face took on a ham tinge; his pointed, gristly nose whistled for breath. He was a horrible sight. He seemed on the point of beseeching them, "Have pity on me!"

It was over at last. Opening his swimming eyes, he pleaded in a hoarse, exhausted voice, "May I go to sleep?"

The boss, angrily eying his watch, cried, "You've gone four minutes over, you!"

And the others took digs at the boss. "We should have taken you on; you'd have got a trimming." "Just the same, that guy's

a regular wild animal!" "What monsters the Lord can turn men into!" "How about some tea?" And, like barges, they floated off to the inn.

What fermented in their iron hearts, I wondered, that they should cluster round that miserable creature and find amusement in his unwholesome gluttony?

It was close and dark in that narrow arcade, heaped with wool, sheepskins, hemp, rope, felt boots and harness. Its thick brick columns were weather-stained and mud-spattered. I had counted every brick, every crack between the bricks, and every gap in the cement, a thousand times over; and their unsightly patterns were stamped on my memory.

Pedestrians loafed along the sidewalk; cabs and loaded sledges slowly creaked up the road. Across the street was a bazaar, a square, two-story affair of red brick, littered with crates, straw, paper scrap, mud and trampled snow.

And everything, people and horses, too, despite their movement, appeared immobile, or to be languidly revolving about a pivot to which each was chained by unseen links. You suddenly realized that this life was almost without sound, or the sound was so thin as to be little better than muteness. The sledge runners squeaked; shop doors slammed; piemen and honey peddlers gave their spiels, but in tones that were dismal and forced. They all sounded alike; one soon got so used to them as to no longer hear them.

The funeral church chimes kept ringing in my ears. That mournful sound seemed to hover over us from morning to night. It got into all my thoughts and emotions, coating all my impressions as with a deposit of copper.

The breath of ennui, chill and poverty exhaled from everything; from the earth raggedly sheeted in stained snow, from the gray snow lid on the roof, from the brick walls, red like chapped flesh. From the chimneys ennui floated in thick, gray smoke and crawled over the low, leaden, vacant sky. In ennui toiling horses steamed and men sighed. And the people here had a smell all their own: a dense, dull stench compounded of sweat, grease, hemp oil, ash and smoke. The smell settled over your head like a snug, warm cap; it trickled down your

chest, making you feel dizzy, making you want to shut your eyes on everything, to raise desperate outcries, to run out and knock your head on a wall.

And I stared into the tradesmen's faces, the stuffed, thick-blooded, chapped faces of men as sluggish as if they slept. They were almost always yawning, their mouths gaping like stranded fish.

In winter business was dull; the shopkeepers' eyes lacked that alert, predatory glitter which lent them animation in other seasons. Their heavy furs weighed them down to the ground and slowed their movements. Their speech dragged, but anger could give it vitality; and it seemed to me that they invited occasions for wrath, in order to demonstrate that some life lingered in them.

I could see how the burden of ennui was crushing them; the only explanation I could find for their sadism, for their victimizing others with insensate horseplay, was that they were in a hopeless struggle with their overpowering ennui.

I sometimes spoke of this with old Peter. Generally he took a mocking attitude toward me, but, because of my fondness for books, he unbent now and then, spoke seriously to me, and gave me advice.

"I despise the way shopkeepers live," I said.

Curling a lock of his beard between his long fingers, he retorted, "Do you know the way they live? Do you frequent their homes? This, my friend, is just a street; nobody lives in the street; people only do business here; and when it's done, hurry home as fast as they can. People walk about, dressed; do you know what they're like underneath? The real person is only to be seen at home, inside his own four walls—you don't know a thing about them!"

"Agreed. But don't they think the same here as at home?"

"How can you know what's in your neighbor's mind?" asked the old appraiser, rolling his eyes. "You can't count a man's thoughts any more than you can count his lice. One man, when he gets home, may drop to his knees and call on God, through his tears, 'Forgive me, dear Lord, for desecrating Thy holy day.' This man's house may be his hermitage, where he is

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alone with God. That's how it is! Every spider is at home in a corner of his own, spins his own web, and figures on the situation he is in, how best to fend for himself."

In serious conversation he pitched his voice lower, to a muttering bass, as if he were confiding secrets.

"Here you go, passing sentences on people; you're too young for that. A lad of your years should rely on his eyes, not his logic. You just look on, hold what you see in mind, and keep quiet. The mind has to do with business; the soul has to do with faith. Reading is fine, but the golden mean is best there as in other things; there are people who've read their way into lunacy and atheism."

I regarded him as something eternal. I found it difficult to think of him growing older or changing in any way. He was fond of telling stories of counterfeiters and notorious swindlers. I had had my belly full of these anecdotes from grandpa, who was the better raconteur. But the purport of the stories was the same in both—that the quest for millions leads to transgression against God and one's fellow men. Toward people old Peter had no feeling; but when he spoke of God his voice became soft, and he sighed and put his hand over his eyes.

"God, too, they try to swindle, and He, Lord Jesus Christ, sees through it and laments, 'Oh, people, my miserable people, they're getting hell ready for you!'"

Once I pointed out to him, "But you, yourself, swindle the peasants."

He shrugged it off. "Should I worry myself over that? I may cheat them of three or four rubles; that's what it comes to."

When he came upon me with a book in my hands, he would take it from me and quiz me on it, trying to trip me up. With astonishment and disbelief he would call out to my boss, "Think of it; the little rascal understands books!" And what he followed with stuck in my memory.

"It'll pay you to listen to this. There were two Cyrils, both bishops; Cyril of Alexandria and Cyril of Jerusalem. Cyril of Alexandria fought against the damn heretic, Nestorius, who fostered the lewd notion that the Holy Mary, having herself been conceived in original sin, could not have been God's

mother; that her issue was a human being, whose name and traits were those of the Messiah; consequently she should be designated Christ-bearer, but not God-bearer. Do you follow that? That's a heresy! Cyril of Jerusalem, he dealt with the Arian heretics."

I was absorbed by his accounts of church history. Caressing his beard with hands carefully groomed, like a priest's, he boasted, "I have it all at my fingertips. In Moscow I disputed the abominable dogmas of the Nikonites, taking on their wise ones, priests and lay people. Yes, my little one, I debated with professors! And one of them found my verbal barb so sharp, he bled from the nose!"

His cheeks flushed; his eyes glittered. For him, his opponent's nosebleed had been the ultimate victory, the topmost ruby of the gold coronet of his triumph; and he took voluptuous delight in the recital.

"Handsome he was, that priest, and healthy looking. There he stands on the platform, and drip, drip from his nose plops the blood. He didn't see it, his humiliation! That priest raged like a lion in the desert. His voice clanged like a bell. But quietly, right between his ribs, my words sawed away! The man was like a furnace; the hateful fires of heresy heated him red-hot—ekh, that was something!"

From time to time other appraisers turned up. They included Pakhomy, a paunchy, one-eyed man, with a seamed and scowling face; little old Lucian, velvety as a mouse, and kind and quick. Lucian was always accompanied by a sombre giant, a coachman in appearance, a forbidding, though handsome, black-bearded man whose face was grim as death, and whose eyes had a fixed glare. Generally they came to offer for sale rare books, old icons and thuribles, or religious vessels. Sometimes they were accompanied by the seller, an elderly Volga man or woman. After they had made the deal, they perched on the counter like crows along a furrow, had rolls and tea sweetened with Lenten sugar, and tut-tutted over the evils perpetrated by the Nikonites.

In one town homes had been raided and devotional books confiscated; in another, a house used for worship had been closed by the police, and the owner prosecuted, under Article

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103. This statute was constantly on their lips, but it was referred to like something inevitable, like winter frost. The words police, raids, prison, courts, Siberia, recurring in their conversation, made real the religious persecution they suffered. The words lodged in my breast like live coals, kindling sympathy and brotherliness toward these sectaries. Reading had taught me to value spiritual fortitude, to respect those who unflinchingly held to their purpose. I ignored the evil that I saw in their attitudes toward life. I let myself see only their serenity and steadfastness, which betokened, it seemed to me, an immovable devotion to their teachings, for whose sake they would make any sacrifice.

In the long run, after encounters with a great variety of these pillars of the traditional faith, both learned and unlearned, I came to see that this steadfastness was rather passivity, the rootedness of a static people who never even wanted to move from the spots they were planted on, whose outworn words and ideas served only to hold them down. Their wills were paralyzed; they could not turn from their backward-looking attitudes to meet a blow; and so, when they were struck out of their fixed place, they toppled over without resistance, like boulders down a hill. They fasted in their own way and remained in their cemeteries of outlived doctrines; their memory of the past had a sort of morbid strength that filled them with insane yearnings for suffering and persecution. Stripped of occasions of suffering, they lost cohesion, they vanished like a cloud blown out in fresh winter gusts.

Undeniably, the faith for which they were contentedly and even smugly prepared to suffer, is a strong one; but what protects it from the wear and tear of time is what often protects old clothes—incrustedations of all sorts of dirt. Mind and soul become habituated to the close and oppressive confines of dogma, and finally see security and comfort in deformity and winglessness.

Our life exhibits few things more lamentable and injurious than this faith constructed on old customs. Within the reach of such ideas, as in the shadows of stone walls, new growth is slow, crippled and feeble. In that dismal faith love rarely

shines; instead, humiliations, annoyances and grudges that verge on hate. Its light is the spectral glow of decay.

But before I came to this realization, I had to bear many dreary years, and shatter many icons in my soul and hurl them out. But when I first encountered these teachers of life, I was mired in dull and squalid circumstance, and they impressed me by their seeming spiritual strength. I thought them the salt of the earth. Almost to a man, they had experienced persecution, imprisonment, exile; they had been driven from place to place with convicts; they had all lived precariously.

I soon perceived, however, that these old folks who scoffed at the "confined spirit" of the Nikonites, gladly helped to keep each other confined. Hunched Pakhomy, when he was in liquor, vaunted his prodigious memory for sacerdotal details. He was at home in certain books as a Jew is in his Talmud; could lay a finger on a picked page, and, from the word his finger covered, could go on, by heart, in a bland, snuffling recitation. Almost always his one eye roamed the floor agitatedly, as if hunting some lost treasure. The book he most frequently used in this performance was Prince Mishetsky's *The Russian Vine*, and the passage he was best at was "The Endurance and Fortitude in Suffering of Our Brave and Glorious Martyrs," with old Peter ever on the alert to trip him up.

"That's wrong! It was not Cyprian the Noble, but Denis the Pure."

"Which Denis? You must be thinking of Dionysius."

"Don't twist words!"

"And don't you lecture me!"

And soon the two, blown up with wrath, would be glaring at each other, Peter bellowing, "Defiler of truth; out of my sight, shameless one!" and Pakhomy, countering, "You roué, you goat, always smelling after women!"

His hands tucked into his sleeves, my boss, excited like a boy, egged on these guardsmen of the Old Faith. "That's the stuff! Give it to him!"

Once old Peter unexpectedly slapped his adversary's face, and put him to flight, and, mopping his sweating face, called out to the fleeing man, "Remember, that sin's on your head. It

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was you who seduced my hand into sin, accursed one; pugh on you!"

Old Peter enjoyed badgering his comrades with concern over the slackness of their faith, and forebodings that they would slide into "Protestantism."

"It's that Aleksasha who bothers you—that cock's started crowing again!"

Protestantism caused him much concern, but my question, "What's the doctrine of that sect?" brought this not very intelligible reply, "There's no worse heresy. Its devotion is given solely to Reason; it rejects God! There's the Bible Christians for one, whose only book is the Bible, which they got from a German, Luther; of whom they say Luther's well named; you see, if you form it as a verb you get *liuto bo, liubo, liuto*.²⁹ And it spreads from the West, from the heretics of those regions."

And, stamping his lame foot, he would say in a cold, ponderous voice, "It's they whom the New Ritualists³⁰ will have to go after, whom they'll have to keep their eyes on—and throw into the fire!—not we who are of the true faith, Easterners of the true, Eastern faith, the original Russian faith! but those derive from the West, infected by free will! The Germans and the French—has anything good come out of them? Think of what they did in the year 12—"

In his excitement he forgot he was talking to a boy; his powerful hands gripped my belt, he pulled me toward him at one moment, pushed me from him the next, speaking, in the meanwhile, with eloquence, with ardor, with a youthful resonance, "In his own imaginings, rank as a forest, roams the mind of man; roams like a wild wolf; becomes the devil's helper; puts the soul, given by God, to torture! What have they not devised, these lackeys of Satan? The Bogomili,³¹ carriers of the Protestant plague, spread this teaching: Satan they aver to be the son of God, Christ's older brother! That's what they've fallen to! Another of their teachings is to acknowledge no superiors, to refuse to work, to desert one's family! To listen

²⁹ A pun on the word *Lutui*, meaning rough or violent.

³⁰ Another term for the Nikonites—the established government sponsored clergy and communicants of the Orthodox Church.

³¹ A sect of the Old Believers.

to them a man can do with nothing; needs no goods at all; just lives as he fancies with the devil to give him hints. That Aleksasha's around, again!"

Called in by the boss to do some chore, I had to leave the old man, who went on, addressing space, "You wingless soul, you kitten born blind, where shall I flee to escape you!" After which he lapsed into silence, and sat motionlessly staring out upon the grisly winter sky.

He began giving me more of his attention, and took a kinder attitude toward me. Finding me reading, he'd look over my shoulder, remarking, "Read, my boy, it will repay you. However, though you may have brains, it's no good having so little regard for your elders. You imagine yourself a match for anyone, but where will that impertinence get you? Nowhere, lad, but to jail. Yes, keep on reading, but bear in mind, books are only books; you have your own wits to use. Danilov, who started the sect of the Khlists, decided there was no need of books, old or new, made a bundle of all his books—and into the water with them! The act of a fool! And now that dog, Aleksasha, must nose around here, to make trouble."

This Aleksasha kept cropping up in his talk. Once, he entered the shop with a grim and thoughtful look, and remarked to my boss, "Aleksasha's in town; arrived yesterday. But I can't rout him out; found himself a snug hiding place."

In a snapping voice my boss replied, "I know nothing about him!"

With a nod the old man said, "Which signifies that to you a man's nothing but a buyer or seller. Well, let's have some tea."

Coming in with the big copper tea pot, I found we had more company—old Lucian, with a grin on his face, and away from the door, in a dim corner, a stranger in a dark coat fastened with a green belt, wearing high felt boots and a cap pulled awkwardly over his forehead. I could hardly see his face, but it seemed decent and modest and a little dejected, like that of an unemployed clerk.

He kept pulling convulsively at his cap, as old Peter, without deigning to look at him, delivered censorious oratory. The stranger lifted his hand as though to cross himself, pushed his cap all the way back, then pulled it all the way down again;

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a compulsive gesture, recalling that of the idiot beggar, Igosha, Death-in-His-Pocket.

"All sorts of snakes infest our sluggish rivers, and muddy the waters," blared old Peter.

Quietly, even gently, the man who looked like a clerk asked, "Is that meant for me?"

"And what if it is?"

"And what, man, have *you* to say for yourself?" the stranger retorted, manfully, but not raising his voice.

"That I say to God—that's my affair."

"No, man, it's mine, too," the stranger said, in a grave and steady voice. "Don't hide your face from the truth; don't hide from yourself in calculated blindness; thereby you sin against God and your fellow men!"

It pleased me to hear him address Peter as "man"; and there was something stirring in his controlled and stately voice. His diction was like that of an eloquent priest at a reading of "Lord, Master of My Life." He leaned forward, rose from his seat, his hands outstretched, and said, "Judge me not, for my sins are no heavier than yours."

The samovar bubbled and piped; the old appraiser held to his scornful tone; but his adversary went on, undeterred. "God alone knows who pollutes the fountain of the Holy Spirit more. It may be you, you scholars, you lettered people. I have no learning or letters; I lead a simple life."

"That notorious simple life of yours—we've heard enough of it!"

"You scribes and Pharisees, it's you who perplex the people, who disrupt the truth faith. About me, what's there to say, tell me?"

"Heretic!" hissed Peter. The other, holding his two hands before his face, like the sides of a book he was reading from, retorted hotly, "Is it your notion that, to herd people out of one pen into another, is an improvement? No, I say. Man be free, I say! What does house, wife or possessions count with the Lord? Let us liberate ourselves, man, from the vanities over which men contend, for which they rend each other—from gold and silver and all manner of wealth, which can but cor-

rupt and defile. Not on fields in this world, but in the vales of Paradise, is the soul to find salvation! Pull yourself free of it all, I say; strike off all chains, all bonds; rip the nets of this world; their weaver is anti-Christ. I take the straight road; I do not play tricks with my soul; I have no part in this dark world."

"No worldly bread and water and trousers for you, eh?" jeered old Peter.

But these gibes did not affect Aleksasha. Low-pitched though his voice remained, it now pealed like a brass trumpet. "Man, what is it you hold dear? You should hold only Him, the one God, dear. With all my stains washed away I appear clean before Him. Heave the world out of your heart, and look at God; you—alone; He—alone! Only thus may you reach God; there is no other approach to Him. That's the salvation road—to give up father and mother; everything! even to lose your eye; which, if it presents temptation, tear it out! If you wrench yourself away from things for His sake, you will keep your soul; take sanctuary in the Spirit, and the soul shall gain eternal life."

"The dog returns to his vomit, that's how it is with you," said old Peter, getting up. "A year has passed, but, instead of acquiring wisdom, you've grown more hardened in your evil!" He limped out of the shop, to Aleksasha's consternation, who asked, "Did he go? Why?"

Good-natured Lucian consoled him, with a wink and a "That's all right," which brought Aleksasha's homily down upon him. "Ah, you, worldly one! Your words, too, sow chaff! What sense have they? So, a triple Hallelujah, a double—"

Lucian, grinning, also left the shop, and Aleksasha, turning to my boss, said complacently, "They can't take it! They vapor out like smoke from the flame."

My boss gave him a sidelong glance, and observed curtly, "I give no thought to it."

"What! You mean to say you give it no thought! But this matter must be thought about!" His head dropped and he sat in silence, until the two old men called him, and the three went off.

This man flared up before me like a bonfire in the dark.

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After his bright blaze was out, I realized that I had seen a revelation in its light, a truth in his rejection of the ordinary ways of life.

That evening, when an occasion presented itself, I raved about him to the chief icon painter. Gentle, sweet-natured Ivan heard me out and explained, "He's a Begoon; they disown all authority."

"How do they live?"

"They roam the earth, like fugitives; wherefore they're called Begoons.³² They're against all property, land or goods. The police consider them subversive and lock them up."

With the bitterness in my life, I could not comprehend what would make one shun good things. In the life around me, there was much that interested me and that I treasured, and Aleksasha soon ebbed out of my mind.

Yet, at one time or another, in a dark hour, his image would return. I saw him crossing a field or trudging the gray forest path, pushing his cap up and down with ticlike movements of his white hands, unstained by toil, mumbling, "I take the straight road; I have no part in this dark world; I have cut all ties."

And with this image, I recalled my father, as he had appeared in grandma's dream, picking his way with a walnut stick, and a spotted dog, whose tongue hung out, at his heels.

³² From the word *beg*, meaning flight. The Begoons were one of the many sects of the Old Believers.

Chapter Thirteen

THE ICONS WERE PAINTED IN A TWO-ROOM WORKSHOP. ONE room had four windows, three over a yard and the fourth over a garden; the second had two windows, one facing the garden, the other the street. The windows were small squares and their aged, iridescent panes reluctantly admitted the wan winter light. The icon painters stooped over the work tables which filled the room. From the ceiling hung glass globes filled with water; these reflected cool white rays from the lamps upon the square planes of the icons.

In these hot, stuffy workrooms some twenty men were at work, men from Palekh, Kholuya, and Mster. They wore cotton shirts, unbuttoned at the neck, and trousers made of ticking. Some were barefoot; some wore sandals. Like blue gauze over their heads hung the smoke of their cheap tobacco; and the room was heavy with a stench compounded of glue, varnish and rotten eggs. Slowly, like tar, dripped their lugubrious, Vladimir tune: "How corrupt the times have become; the lad seduced the maid, nor cared who knew."

They sang other sad ditties, but this was their favorite. Its languid measures did not interrupt one's thoughts, nor the strokes of the fine, weasel-hair brush as it outlined a figure or etched in the sharp lines of suffering over a gaunt Saint's face. At the windows sat the engraver, Goloviev, a tipsy old man with a swollen blue nose, tapping away with his little hammer. Its incessant, dry, pecking sound pitted the flowing song. It had the effect of a worm gnawing in a tree.

Some evil genius had brought division of labor into the craft, to such extent as to strip each process of creativeness, leaving it incapable of inspiring love or sustaining any interest. The bad-tempered, squinting woodworker, Panfil, planed and glued together the different sized panels of cypress and lilac wood; the

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consumptive youth, Davidov, laid on the background colors; his comrade, Sorokin, did the inscription; Milyashin pencilled the outlines of the decorations from a pattern; old Goloviev laid on the gilt and embossed the design in gold; others painted in the landscapes; others the robes; and then the icons were stacked up, against the walls, waiting for the brushes of the painters who did the faces, hands and feet. It was weird, seeing a large icon that was to stand on an altar or to panel an altar door leaning against the wall, minus face, hands or feet—merely robes or armor or the tunics of archangels.

To me, these differently painted boards suggested death. What might have given them life was lacking; it seemed to have been there, but to have been spirited away, leaving behind nothing but voluminous cloths.

After the features had been put in by the face painter, the icon went to one who colored in the engraved design; still another worker did the lettering, and the varnishing was the job of the foreman, the taciturn Ivan Larionovich. His face was gray; his fine, silky beard was gray; and his strangely sad and sunken eyes were gray. His smile was friendly, but it was hard to return it. For some reason he made you feel awkward. He resembled the image of Simeon Stolpnik; he was similarly withered and gaunt; and his still eyes seemed fixed on something remote, with glances that penetrate people and walls, like that abstracted Saint.

A few days after I joined the workshop, its chief worker, a Don Cossack named Kapendiukhin, a strong, good-looking chap, came in drunk. His teeth were clenched, and his rather soft, feminine eyes twitched as, wordlessly, he set about demolishing everything within his reach. Though not more than medium height, he was of powerful build; and he lunged on the things in the workroom, like a cat on rats in the cellar. The other workmen took panic and, shivering in corners, each called on the other to "knock him down!"

The face painter, Eugene Sitanov, succeeded in knocking out the delirious man by a blow on the head with a stool. The prostrate Cossack was then tied up in towels, which he began to bite through, like an animal. Infuriated, Sitanov climbed on a table, and, with his hands to his sides, poised himself to jump

on the Cossack. Sitanov being a tall and heavy man, this would have meant crushing Kapendiukhin's breastbone. The foreman, Larionovich, appeared just in time, and without removing overcoat or cap, motioned Sitanov back, and in a calm tone, as if it were a routine instruction, ordered the workmen, "Carry him out in the hall; let him sober up there."

The Cossack was hauled out; the chairs and tables were set in place again, and work was resumed. The workmen commented on the strength of their drunken shopmate, and predicted his death in a quarrel. "It will be hard to kill him," remarked Sitanov, in a matter-of-fact voice, as if it were something he knew by experience.

Gazing at Larionovich, I wondered at his control over these tough, pugnacious men. He gave every one of them directions, and not even the best of them took affront. Kapendiukhin received his special attention.

"Kapendiukhin, you're a real painter; I mean your work should be from life, in the Italian style. Oils call for warm coloring; you've mixed in too much white; the eyes you've given the Madonna are ice cold. The red apple cheeks you've given her don't go with them. And they're not set right; one's over her nose and the other lands on her temple; and the face isn't pure and holy; it's crafty and cold. Put more thought into your work, Kapendiukhin."

The Cossack listened with a sour expression. With a pettish smile in his feminine eyes he said, in a voice naturally sweet, but hoarse from drinking, "Ekh, father of mine, this is no calling for me. I'm a born musician, but I got stuck among monks."

"With a mind to it, anything can be learned."

"No; not my sort! I should have been a coachman, driving a team of three fast horses, eh?" And, his Adam's apple vibrating, he sang dispiritedly, "Ai-akh! had I hounds and horses, then, on gloomy, frosty nights, I'd speed to my beloved!"

With a slow smile, Ivan adjusted his glasses on his melancholy, gray nose, and went out. A dozen voices joined in the tune, and the flood of song seemed to heave the shop into the air and shake it rhythmically.

"The horses knew the way; they got there by themselves."

The apprentice, Paul Odinstov, stopped pouring off egg yolks

and, eggshells in hand, led the chorus like a maestro. Lost in that intoxication of song, they seemed to breathe from one breast, and to be animated by one emotion; all kept their eyes on Kapendiukhin, the Cossack. In singing he was their acknowledged leader; they followed him as if magnetized, responding to every flutter of his hands, as his arms stretched out like wings, and he seemed poised for flight. I think if he had suddenly stopped and shouted, "Let's wreck the place!" even the most responsible workmen would have joined him, and the place would immediately have been demolished.

He didn't sing often, but then it was with an all-conquering effect. It was as if these people were light and inflammable to his touch, and he would pick them up and kindle them, as if everything became pliant when it entered the zone heated by his mighty voice.

In me the songs evoked a scalding envy of the singer, of his amazing hold upon people. An overwhelming emotion flooded my heart, till I thought it would burst. Close to tears, I had an impulse to cry out to the singers, "I love you!"

When the tubercular, sallow Davidov, strangely covered with tufts of hair, opened his mouth in song, he looked like a newly hatched crow.

Only the Cossack could get such rollicking songs going. Ordinarily they sang that mournful, dragging tune about these corrupt times, another about the forests, and another on the death of Alexander I: "How Our Alexander Went to Review His Troops." At the suggestion of Zhikharev, the best of our face painters, they sometimes started hymn tunes, but rarely with success. Zhikharev sought some special effect; he had a fixed notion of harmony; and he would keep interrupting the singers.

A man of about forty-five, dried out and bald, what was left of his hair was curly and black like a gypsy's; and his eyebrows were thick as moustaches. His swarthy, un-Russian face was handsomely adorned by a full, pointed beard; but the fierce moustaches under his prominent nose were rather a superfluity on the same face with his eyebrows. His blue eyes were ill-matched, the left being conspicuously larger.

"Paul," he would call out in a tenor voice, to my fellow

apprentice, Odinstov, "Start now, 'Praise——' The rest of you, listen!"

And Paul, wiping his hand on his apron, would lead off, "Praise——"

And several voices would come in with, ". . . the name of the Lord"; but they never satisfied Zhikharev. He would interrupt, "Lower, Eugene; your voice should be coming from the very depths of your soul."

Sitanov, in a voice so deep it boomed like a kettle drum, bellowed, "Slaves of the Lord!"

"Not that way. Here, it should shake the earth, it should make the doors and the windows fly open!"

Zhikharev's excitement was quite indescribable. His astounding eyebrows would throb up and down, his voice would crack, and his fingers would fly over an imaginary dulcimer.

"Slaves of the Lord! Understand?" he would repeat, solemnly. "You've got to feel that in your bones—all the way in! 'Slaves, praise the Lord!' How can you, living human beings, fail to understand that?"

"We just don't seem to get it the way you want it," Sitanov quietly said.

"Well, let it go!" And Zhikharev, annoyed, returned to his work.

He was our prize worker, being able to paint the faces both in the Byzantine style and in the art-conscious, new Italian style. Larionovich, on taking commissions for icon-altars, would always consult Zhikharev. He had a comprehensive knowledge of the whole range of icon-art. Costly copies of miracle-working icons, such as the Theodorov and Kazan, had passed through his hands. On seeing an original he would grumble, "There's no getting away from it; they hold us down!"

Despite his top position in the shop, he was not always as aloof as the rest, and treated the apprentices, Paul and me, with consideration. He tried to give us some instruction, something none of the others bothered to do. But he was hard to follow. He was a cheerless sort, and would sometimes go on for a week without a word, as if he were a mute. He behaved toward people as if they were all strangers, and of an astound-

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ing sort, such as he had never come across before. Though he enjoyed singing, in such moods he did not join in, did not even seem to hear. And the others stared at him and winked at each other. Dark and foreign-looking himself, he would bend over the icon, which rested on his knees and against the edge of the table, and brush on the dark, foreign face. Suddenly he would call out, as if in annoyance, "Forerunner—(*predtech*) what does that mean? *Tech* means 'go' in Slavonic; so the fore-runner is one who goes before; that's all there is to it."

The workshop was in dead silence. Covert glances were turned on Zhikharev, and there was suppressed laughter. Then, out of the silence, came these strange words, "He should be painted in a sheepskin and wings."

I asked him, "Whom are you talking to?"

He gave me no reply, either not having heard me, or not deigning to answer. Again his words sang out in the waiting stillness, "We ought to know more about the lives of the saints. But what do we know? Where are the wings of our lives? Where's the soul? The soul, where? The models, yes, but the souls, where?"

His thinking aloud drew derisive laughter, even from Sitanov, and there generally followed a gloating whisper, "He'll get stewed this Saturday." At that, tall and muscular Sitanov, a youth of twenty-two, round-faced, and almost hairless, would stare morosely into a corner.

I remember how, when the copy of the Theodorov Madonna was finished, Zhikharev set it up on the table and addressed it in an excited tone, "It's done! Little Mother! Shining Grail, Thou! Bottomless Vessel, in which fall tears from the hearts of the world's living!"

And, getting into his overcoat, he went off to a bar. The younger workers laughed and whistled; the older ones heaved envious sighs; Sitanov went over to take a look at the completed icon, and said, "Sure! He has to get stewed! It's a pang to him to let his work go. Not all of us are worthy of suffering such pain!"

Zhikharev's benders, which always started on Saturdays, were nothing like the usual workers' sprees. This is how it began: Saturday morning he would write a note which he would

have Paul deliver. About noon he would tell Larionovich, "Today, I'm going to the baths."

"When will you be back?"

"The Lord—"

"Please get back by Tuesday."

Zhikharev made the promise with a nod of his bald skull and a flourish of his eyebrows. On his return from the baths, he dressed up, nattily, in tie and dickey and satin vest, with a silver chain strung across; and then left, without a word, except to order Paul and me, "Have the place clean by evening; have the table scraped and washed."

Then a festive stir would possess everybody. They went to the baths; they spruced up; they rushed through their suppers. Later in the evening Zhikharev reappeared, bringing snacks, beer and wine. A woman followed behind, oversize in so many ways she looked monstrous. She was nearly six and a half feet tall, making our big Sitanov look insignificant beside her, and our stools look like doll's furniture. She was well proportioned, but her bosom jettied up, like a mountain ridge, toward her chin; and she moved heavily and clumsily. She must have been forty, but her pliant face, with its big, horse eyes, was fresh, unwrinkled and lively. Its little mouth looked daubed on like a cheap doll's. She grinned at everybody, and made incessant small talk. "How goes it? It's real cold today. It's so stuffy in here! The paint smell, that's it. So, how goes it?"

She was relaxing to look at, like a placid, wide river; but her conversation, heavy with redundant phrases, was soporific. She breathed hard before she spoke, puffing out her quite livid cheeks, rounder than before. This made the younger men giggle and exchange whispers, "An engine!" "No, a steeple!"

Her lips pursed and her hands folded under her bosom, she sat at the table next to the samovar, and turned a friendly horselike eye on us all, one after the other. We were all respectful toward her, the younger ones even timid. They looked at that enormous figure with avid eyes that dropped in confusion, however, on meeting her enveloping gaze. Zhikarev treated her with respect, using the formal pronoun, calling her "little comrade," and bowing as he offered her snacks. To

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which she made a languid protest, "Now, don't you be putting yourself out for me; no need to fuss."

She moved through life without fluster. She raised her arms only from the elbows, which she kept at her sides. A hot scent came from her, like that of bread out of the oven. Stuttering in his ardor, old Goloviev eulogized her beauty like a deacon offering ritual praises. When he became confused, she would smile amiably and help out with autobiography, "We were no way good-looking in our youth; it's all the result of living as a woman. By thirty it got so the nobility, itself, took notice; and, actually, a garrison commander offered a coach and a team of horses."

Kapendiukhin, unkempt from drink, turned a hostile glance on her and asked, hoarsely, "What did he offer them for?"

"For our love, of course."

"Love, what kind of love?"

The woman answered simply, "I don't have to tell a handsome young fellow like you about love."

The shop resounded with laughter, but Sitanov muttered to Kapendiukhin, "She's a fool—or worse! Everybody knows it's only a great passion that brings them to that!"

He was pale from the drink; the sweat on his temples stood out in pearl-like drops; alarming lights kindled in his sensitive eyes.

Old Goloviev, however, seeming to pick tears out of his eyes with his fingers, and wrinkling his prodigious nose, asked, "How many children have you?"

"Just one."

There was a lamp over the table and another over the oven. Their light was dim and shadows clustered in the corners, from which glowered the faceless figures of unfinished icons. The blotches of dull gray where faces and hands should have been, looked eerie and disproportional, and my usual fantasy returned to me—that the saints' bodies had stolen away from under their painted vestments. The glass bowls, now hoisted up near the ceiling, rested on hooks, in billows of smoke, and reflected a bluish light.

Zhikharev circulated around the tables, urging people to eat and drink. His broad, bald head nodded to one after the other,

his skinny fingers were in incessant motion. The nose of this gaunt man, beaked like that of a bird of prey, now looked sharper than ever; and when it caught the light, it cast a big shadow over his cheek. "Drink up and eat, friends," he persisted, in his resonant tenor.

"Don't trouble yourself over us, comrade. Everyone has his own hands and his own appetite. More than his appetite allows he can't eat, not even if he sets his mind on it."

"Be at peace, friends," cried Zhikarev, in sonorous tones. "We're all slaves of the Lord; let's sing out, 'Praised be His Name!'"

The singing did not go well. People were too stupefied with food and vodka. Kapendiukhin now held a double keyboard accordion; young Victor Salautin, solemn and dark as a young crow, had a drum, and his fingers wandered over the taut skin, scrubbing up a deep rumble; and tambourines jingled.

"Now, the Russian dance!" commanded Zhikarev, "please, little comrade."

"Akh," sighed the woman. "What a bother you are!"

A space had been cleared, and there she stood, planted like a sentry, in her short brown skirt, a yellow batiste blouse, with a red kerchief over her head.

Its little bells chiming, the accordion voiced impassioned laments; the tambourines whispered; the drum uttered heavy sighs. The effect was unpleasing, as if somebody was having a tantrum and knocking his head on a wall.

Zhikarev was no dancer. He merely let himself go, hopping like a goat and rapping the heels of his highly polished boots on the floor, never on the same beat as the noisy music. His feet seemed not to belong to him; his movements were an uncouth writhing, as of a wasp in a spider's web, or a fish in a net. Hardly a cheering sight, yet they all, even those who were drunk, seemed awed by these convulsions, silently following the changes of his arms and face, whose shifts of expression were astounding. From a diffident and ingratiating look, he would turn to frowning hauteur; then to a look of surprise; then, sighing and shutting his eyes, he would open them and look bowed with grief. With clenched fists he furtively approached the woman, but when he reached her, stamped his

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foot, dropped to his knees, flung out his arms, and from upraised eyebrows flashed her a rapt smile. She smiled back, and affably bid him, "Get up, friend." Her eyes sought to close, but the gap was too much for the lids, and the result was an unpleasing grimace. She, too, was a poor dancer, doing nothing but waddle to and fro, silently shifting the weight of her ponderous body from leg to leg. From her limp left hand hung a handkerchief, and her right arm was crooked around her hip, giving her the shape of a gigantic pitcher.

As Zhikharev circled around this massive woman, his expression underwent so many changes, he might have been ten dancing men, not one. Now he was all hushed humility; now he was all pride and defiance; in a third mood he was all timidity and deprecating sighs, as if anxious to steal away, unobserved, from this formidable creature. Then, another person made his appearance, one who gnashed his teeth and thrashed convulsively about like a hurt dog. This uncouth and joyless performance brought to mind the squalid affairs I had witnessed in that backyard among the soldiers, washerwomen and cooks.

Sitanov made a quiet remark that dinned in my memory, "Everybody cheats in these affairs; it's part of the game. There's no love; it's just a diversion; and everybody's ashamed of it."

I was loathe to believe that everybody cheated in these affairs. What about Queen Margot? And Zhikharev, here, certainly was sincere. And Sitanov, himself, as I knew, had been deceived by a girl of the streets with whom he had fallen in love; yet he had treated her kindly, and had not given her a beating, as he had been urged to.

The big woman continued to sway and, with a fixed, corpse-like smile, to wave her handkerchief; and Zhikharev kept up his contortions around her; and, watching them, I thought, had Eve, who succeeded in deceiving God, in any way resembled this horse? And suddenly, she became repugnant to me.

The faceless images stared from the shadowy walls. The black night bulged upon the windows. The lamps were dim; the workshop was stifling; if you listened for it, the drips of water from the copper pan into the wooden bucket could be

heard above the shuffle of feet and chatter of voices. How little this resembled the life presented in books—so painfully little!

Finally, everybody had had enough of it, and Kapendiukhin turned the accordion over to Salautin and said, "Come on! Let's have it!"

He reminded me of Tsigan; like him, he danced as if he were whirling in air. Paul and Sorokin followed after him, in fleet and ardent steps. The tubercular Davidov also slid his feet over the floor, coughing all the while from the dust, the smoke, and the reek of vodka and smoked sausage, which has a tannery smell. They danced, yelled and sang, as if conscious that this was a holiday on which they offered and met challenges to skill and endurance.

Sitanov, drunk, and looking as if about to burst into tears, inquired of one after another, "Think anybody really can love such a woman?"

Larionovich, with a shrug of his bony shoulders, replied, "A woman's a woman, what more is there to look for?"

The pair under discussion had gone off, unobserved; Zhikharev not to turn up in the workshop for two or three days, and then, after a trip to the bath, to work, speechless, in his corner, sedate and aloof for the next fortnight.

"Are they gone?" Sitanov asked himself, peering all through the workshop with his mournful, gray-blue eyes. He had a plain face, rather prematurely old, but he had kind and candid eyes. His friendliness to me was due to my scrapbooks filled with copied verses. He was an outright non-believer, though, aside from Larionovich, it was hard to think of anyone in the workshop as having faith in or love of God. All their references to Him were mocking, like their remarks about their mistresses. Yet, they crossed themselves at meals, and said prayers before going to sleep, and were at church Sundays and other holy days. Sitanov, however, abstained from all this, and was regarded an atheist.

"There's no God," he asserted.

"Then, where do we come from?"

"I don't know."

How was it possible that God did not exist? I asked him, and he replied, raising his long arm above his head, "God is high,

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you see." Then, lowering his arm to about two feet off the floor, he said, "And man is low! Right? But it's written, you know, that man is created in the image of God. Now, what's Goloviev the image of?"

This bowled me over. That slovenly and besotted old man, for all his years, was addicted to an unmentionable vice. People like the Viatkan soldier, Yermokhin and grandma's sister came to mind. Was that God's image in them?

"Human beings are swine, you know," declared Sitanov, and then added, consolingly, "but, Alex, there are some good people, really."

It was easy to get along with him; he was so open. When there was something he didn't know, he was frank to say so. In that he was unique. Up to my meeting him, I had encountered only people who were omniscient, and discussed everything.

I was puzzled to find in Sitanov's scrapbook, along with much good poetry that reached into the soul, salacious verse that could only make one ashamed. When I mentioned Pushkin, he showed me the "Gavriliad," which he had copied down. "Pushkin? Just a clown! But Benediktov—he's worth talking about!" And, with shut eyes, and in a rapt whisper, he recited: "Oh, the witchery of a beautiful woman's breast!"

His favorite lines, which he recited with elated pride, were: "Even the eagle's eye cannot penetrate that warm sanctuary and unriddle that heart!"

"Understand?" And it embarrassed me to have to admit that I couldn't understand something that gave him so much pleasure.

Chapter Fourteen

MY WORK WAS SIMPLE ENOUGH. I ROSE WHILE THE MEN WERE still in bed to get the samovar ready for them; while they were having their tea in the kitchen, Paul and I cleaned up the workrooms and set out the paints, after which I went over to the store. My evening chores were to prepare the colors and to learn by looking on. For a time, looking on absorbed me; but it was soon apparent to me that the operations of this handicraft, so minutely divided, gave no joy to the craftsmen, who were bored by it to the point of torture.

Soon I was using my evenings as leisure time. I told the craftsmen of my experiences on the steamers, and tales from books. Imperceptibly, I took on the role of storyteller and reader to the men. I discovered that they had seen less of the world than I, having been caged in such workshops from childhood. Of them all, only Zhikharev had seen Moscow, of which he reported, "There they don't cry; they know how to look after themselves."

Of the rest, none had been farther than Shuya or Vladimir. They asked me where there Russians and churches in Kazan. To them Perm was off in Siberia; and they could not take in the fact that Siberia lay beyond the Urals. They spoke of sea fish coming from the Urals. "Where do they get sturgeon? From the Caspian Sea? So the Urals come down to the sea?" It was hard for me to realize they were not joking, when they located England across the Atlantic, and gave Napoleon a genealogy that linked him with the aristocracy of Kaluga.

They questioned my reports of what I had seen with my own eyes; they preferred macabre tales seasoned with a little of the historical. Even the older men preferred fantasy to reality. The more unreal and incredible the story, the more ab-

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sorbed they became. They sought an escape from reality into a dream future, a refuge from the squalor and privation of their daily life.

This startled me the more, since I was becoming more aware how life contradicted the books. In the books there were no people like Smoury, Jake the Stoker, Aleksasha the wanderer, Zhikharev, or the laundress, Natalie.

Davidov fished a tattered copy of Golitsinsky's stories out of his trunk, *Ivan Vyzhigin, the Bulgarian*, and a volume of *Baron Brambusse*. They enjoyed having me read them aloud, Larionovich remarking, "Good. It keeps us from quarreling and making a racket."

I hunted out books from everywhere; and the readings occurred almost nightly. They were pleasant, those evenings. It became quiet as the night itself in the workrooms. Above the tables, like chill, white stars, the glass globes cast their rays on heads, tousled or bald. Serene, thoughtful faces were turned toward me. Every now and then words of praise for the author or the hero were interjected. The men were interested and amiable then, quite different from their ordinary selves. I was fond of them, then, and they treated me well. I felt contented to be there.

"With books," remarked Sitanov, "it becomes like spring, when the winter double windows are removed, and we can breathe the fresh air."

Books were hard to get, since we could not afford the rentals. I got hold of them, somehow, by begging or borrowing. From an officer of the fire patrol I received a volume of Lermontov. This gave me my first awareness of the power of poetry over people. Even now I can see Sitanov, after hearing the opening lines of "The Demon," looking at the book, then at my lips, then putting his brush down, cradling his knees in his long arms, and rocking himself with a blissful look on his face.

"Quiet, brothers!" said Larionovich, and, also dropping his work, drew his chair up to Sitanov's table, where I was doing the reading. The poem brought us both pain and delight. My voice broke till I could scarcely read, and the tears gushed from my eyes. But I was stirred still more, by the absorption of the workers; everything seemed to have veered from its cus-

tomy orbit; all were drawn to me as by a magnet. When I had finished reading the first part, nearly everybody in the room was crowding around the table, arms around each other's shoulders, faces smiling or lost in thought. And Zhikharev pushed my head back into the book, ordering me, "Read further!"

When I had finished the book, he took it from me, studied the title, put it under his arm, and said, "We'll have it again, tomorrow. I'll keep the book safe."

Having put Lermontov under lock and key, he returned to his table. The stillness in the workrooms continued, as the men quietly resumed their posts. Sitanov went to the window where, his brow against the glass, he stood as though frozen. Zhikharev, putting his brush down again, said solemnly, "So, that's life; slaves of God—ah, yes!" Shrugging and covering his face, he added, "I can do the devil, make him dark and shaggy, the wings all flames, done in red lead; but face, hands, feet, they have to be a blue-white, like snow under moonlight."

Until it was nearly time for our late supper, he fidgeted on his stool, with an agitation strange in him, his fingers tapping on the table, and holding forth in a rambling monologue on the devil, women, Eve, Paradise, and sins of the saints, concluding, "It's the truth. If the saints yielded to lewd women, certainly the devil might be tempted by a pure soul."

He was heard in silence. Like me, probably the rest had no inclination to speak. The work dragged; they kept looking at their watches; and at the stroke of ten they stopped. Sitanov, Zhikharev and I went out into the yard. Looking up at the stars, Sitanov recited, "They shone, like a caravan, wandering in space," adding his comment, "That's something your ordinary eye don't see!"

Shivering in the frost, Zhikharev said, "I can't carry lines in my mind. I have no memory. But he . . . astounding . . . a man who even pities the devil! Makes you sorry for him, doesn't he?"

"He does," Sitanov agreed.

"That's a man for you!" exclaimed Zhikharev. In the doorway, he stopped to caution me, "Don't talk about the book in the store; it must be one of the banned books." I was over-

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joyed; I thought it must be one of the books my confessor had referred to.

Everybody was meditative at supper. The usual din and chatter was lacking, as if we were preoccupied with some important occurrence. As we were undressing for bed, Zhikharev pulled out the book, and commanded me, "Let's have it again!" A number of the men got out of bed to hear it, sitting around me, cross-legged and in their bed clothes. And again, when I had finished, Zhikharev's fingers drummed on the table, and he said, "A living picture, that devil; and that's what he's like, eh, brothers?"

Sitanov, looking over my shoulder, read some lines, and laughed. "I'll copy that down in my notebook."

Zhikharev strode to his own table with the book; then returned and said, in a cracked and indignant voice, "We're no better than blind puppies, living for a purpose we don't know. Neither God nor the devil needs us; what sort of slaves of the Lord are we? Jehovah, Himself, is God's slave; God spoke with Him. And with Moses, too. And He named Moses—'He's mine—a man of God!' But what are we?"

Shutting the book, he started putting on his clothes, and said to Sitanov, "Come on out for a drink."

"At my bar," said Sitanov, quietly.

After they had gone, I stretched out on the floor beside Paul. I heard him turning, snoring, then weeping.

"What's the matter?"

"I feel so sorry for them it makes me ill," he explained. "I've been with them four years; I know them through and through."

I, too, pitied them. We stayed awake a long time, discussing them in whispers, discovering good traits in each, something to feed our adolescent sympathy.

Paul and I were friends. They turned him, finally, into a competent craftsman; but not for long. Before the end of the third year, he had become an alcoholic; later, in the Khitrov market place in Moscow, I ran across him and found him in rags and recently, I heard that typhoid had done for him. It gives me pain to think of the number of decent people I have seen gone to ruin. People in all lands go to pieces; self-destruct-

tion comes easy to all; but nowhere do people wreck themselves with such headlong, senseless speed, as in our Russia.

At that time he was a round-headed youth, a couple of years older than I, gay, bright, honest and talented. He did excellent drawings of birds, cats and dogs; and clever cartoons of the craftsmen, each of whom he pictured in a feathered incarnation; Sitanov as a melancholy woodcock teetering on one leg; Zhikharev as a cock with a plucked head and a ripped comb; sickly Davidov as a crippled lapwing; and—his masterpiece—the engraver, Goloviev, as a bearded bat, with a sneering nose, and four feet armed with six nails apiece. From the round, dark face glared white, round eyes, with pupils small as lentils; in addition they were crossed, imparting an expression at once lifelike and monstrous.

The workers took no offense at the cartoons of themselves, but were disturbed by the one of Goloviev, and warned the artist, "Better tear it up; if the old man sees it, he'll murder you!"

The filthy, corrupt, constantly tipsy old man was cloyingly pious and unwearily in malice. He kept traducing his shopmates to the store manager, to whom the owner had betrothed her niece, and who, on that account, had come to consider the business as his, and to boss the craftsmen who hated, but feared him, and therefore feared his toady, Goloviev, too.

Paul, in turn, harassed the old engraver with such persistence and resourcefulness, one would think he had set that as his life's work. In this I collaborated with ardor; and the workers enjoyed our usually coarse and heedless horseplay, though they cautioned us, "It'll get you into trouble, kids! Kuzka-Zhuchok will murder you!" Kuzka-Zhuchok was our secret nickname for the store manager.

Untroubled by these warnings, we took advantage of Goloviev's drunken stupors, once, to paint his face, another time to gild his nose; and it took him three days to dig the gold out of the pores of that spongy organ. But with each such success, I cou'd not help recollecting the little Viatkin soldier on the steamer, and I was uneasy in my soul. But, despite his age, Goloviev was strong enough to pay us back with a beating, which he would follow with complaints to the owner.

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This woman, who was also a habitual drunk, but whom drink only made more amiable, would do her best to scare us. Pounding on the table with her puffy hands, she would exclaim, "Misbehaving again, you animals! Where's your respect for the old? Now, which of you poured the chemical in his vodka glass?"

"We both did it."

The astounded woman cried out, "Good heavens! They flaunt it! You accursed ones, have respect for an old man!"

She sent us off and let the store manager deal with us. To me he said wrathfully, "You read books, the Holy Scriptures, no less, and then behave like that. Watch your step, brother!"

The owner was lonely and melancholy. After tippling syrup brandies, she would sing at her window, "No sympathetic heart turns to me; no pity is shown; to none can I speak my sorrow; I must grieve alone." And ended it with the quavering long drawn sob of the old, "Oo-oo."

I saw her, once, carrying a pitcher of warm milk downstairs, and suddenly collapsing, continuing her descent, seated, with a bump on each step, but never letting go of the pitcher. As the milk splashed over her, she held the pitcher out at arm's length, and scolded it, "What's come over you, satyr? Where are you bound for?"

Though she was not fat, she was flabby, resembling an old cat past her mouse-hunting days, sluggish from overeating, who now could only purr over memories of past hunts and frolics.

"This shop," said Sitanov, with a preoccupied frown, "used to do a big business. It used to be a first-class place, with clever craftsmen at the tables; but since Kuzka-Žuchok got his paws on it, it's gone to pot! You feel you're slaving away for strangers, and when you think of it, something seems to snap in your head, like a broken spring; and you feel like loafing—to thumb your nose at any kind of job—just to stretch out on the roof, all summer through, and look at the sky."

Paul aped Sitanov; puffing at a cigarette given him by one of the men, he too held forth on the subjects of God, drink and women, and especially the mortality of the products of labor, created by one only to be destroyed by another, and neither

able to understand or appreciate it. And then his alert, pleasant face would age and take on shadows. Sitting on his bedding on the floor, he would stare through the blue quadrangle of the window at the snow-covered roof of the shed below, and the stars above in the wintry sky.

The workers' sleep was noisy with snoring or dream-mumbling. One of them had a nightmare. Above, Davidov kept coughing out the residue of his life. In the corner, alongside each other, bound together in the iron sleep of drunkenness, sprawled the "slaves of God," Kapendiukhin, Sorokin and Pershin. From the walls glowered the faceless stares of unfinished icons. From the floor, where they had fermented in the cracks, came the fetid reek of rotten eggs and dirt.

"Lord, how pitiable they are!" whispered Paul.

I found this feeling sorry for ourselves and the others, more and more disquieting. As I have observed before, both of us thought of the workers as good people, who led lives unworthy of them, tedious and evil. During the winter storms, under which everything—trees, houses, and earth, itself—shivered and moaned, and during Lent with its sombre bells, tedium submerged the workshop like a tide, weighed on it like lead, prostrating the craftsmen, deadening them, forcing them to the taverns and to women who served, like vodka, to induce forgetfulness.

On such nights books had no power; and Paul and I provided other entertainment, dressing up for improvised comic roles and coating our faces with soot or paint, carrying on the battle against boredom, until their laughter brought us victory. I dramatized my recollections of the story of the soldier who saved the life of Peter the Great; and using Davidov's cot for our stage, we decapitated the supposititious Swede, to uproarious laughter from our audience. We got a particularly big hand when we enacted the mishaps of the Chinese devil, Tsing-Yu-Tong, when, for a change, he sought to do good. Paul played the title role, and I all the other parts—the peasants, the crowds, the good soul, and the stones, too, whereon the poor devil, bruised and exhausted, after his vain efforts to practice virtue, rested up.

This drew loud laughter, and the ease with which it could

be so evoked astounded and irritated me. "You clowns!" they yelled at us, "you devils!" The more I saw of it, the more pained I was to realize that sorrow brought quicker responses than joy. In itself, joy seemed to have no value to them as not belonging to their lives; only as a relief to the burdened, as a contrast to the Russian melancholy, did it have a place. What innate vigor can there be in a joy that has no life of its own, nor will to live for itself, but only as surcease from miseries? Much too frequently the Russian gaiety takes a sudden turn to cruelty and tragedy. Suddenly, in a dancer who appears to be soaring out of his chains, a wild beast breaks loose, and with the frenzy of anguish, he leaps upon all whom he encounters, rending, biting, destroying.

This hysterical elation, to which they were driven by outer pressures, troubled me; and disregarding what might be thought of me, I improvised fantasies that I hoped would evoke a pure, free, spontaneous gaiety in them; and in a measure I succeeded. I astonished them and won their praises; yet, the misery I had almost managed to rid them of slipped back, and regained its grip.

Gray Larionovich remarked, "God bless you! You're a cheering sort." And Zhikharev joined in with, "We're lucky to have him. You know, Alex, you ought to join a circus or theater; you'd make a fine clown." Only two of the workers there, Kapendiukhin and Sitanov, went to the theater on Christmas or carnival week; and the older workers were earnest in advising them, afterward, to purify themselves by washing themselves in baptismal Jordan water. Sitanov was persistent in urging me, "Better drop this and become an actor." And, as illustration, he would give me a fervid recital of the sad life of the actor, Yakovlev. "You see what can happen!"

Sitanov liked to tell stories of Marie Stuart, "the wanton," as he named her; and particularly of "the Spanish knight." "Don Cesar de Bazan was a real knight, Alex, a wonderful guy." And there was a bit of "the Spanish knight" in Sitanov, himself.

Once he came upon three firemen in the market place, beating up a peasant for amusement, with a crowd of about forty

onlookers enjoying the spectacle. Sitanov lunged through, his long arms swinging; he beat off the firemen, carried the peasant to safety through the mob, crying, "Get him away!" and then returned, one against three. The firehouse was only a few steps away; it would have been simple for the three to have summoned their mates and killed Sitanov. Fortunately, he had so terrified them that they ran away, with Sitanov calling, "You dogs!" after them.

A Sunday diversion for the younger workers were the bouts held in the Tyesny yard beyond the Peter and Paul churchyard, where carters and peasants from the nearby villages gathered to watch their champions fighting it out with champions put up by Nizhny workmen. One of the carters' champions was a celebrated bruiser, a Mordvin giant with a little head, and incessantly tearing eyes. Smearing the tears on his filthy coat sleeve, he stood in front of his backers, his feet wide apart, and called out in genial challenge, "Come on out! What's the matter? Turned cold?"

Kapendiukhin, our champion, always lost. The breathless, bleeding Cossack would gasp out, "I'll beat that Mordvin yet, if it costs me my life." And that became his life's purpose. For it he even gave up vodka; he massaged himself in snow before going to bed; he ate more meat; and exercised with two-pound weights to build his muscles; but all to no avail. Finally he stitched a lead weight into his glove, and gloated to Sitanov, "Now we'll finish off that Mordvin!"

"Throw that away!" warned Sitanov, "or I'll expose you!"

Kapendiukhin refused to believe him; but just as the bout was about to start, Sitanov told the Mordvin, "One side, please; there's something I have to say to Kapendiukhin."

Reddening, the Cossack shouted, "Beat it! I have nothing to do with you!"

"You know you have!" said Sitanov, with a significant look. Kapendiukhin stamped his feet, pulled off his boxing gloves, tucked them into his blouse, and left the yard.

Both groups were disconcerted, and a man of prestige in these circles berated Sitanov, "It's against the rules, brothers, to intrude private matters in the ring." And Sitanov was beset

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on all sides and vilified. At last he broke his silence to say to the ring authority, "Was I to stand aside and let murder be done?"

Then the expert understood, and doffing his cap to Sitanov, said, "We're grateful to you!"

"But please keep this to yourself, uncle; don't spread it around."

"What for? Kapendiukhin hardly ever wins, and always being the loser makes a man desperate. That's understandable. But from now on when they fight, the gloves will first be inspected."

"That's up to you."

When the expert went away, our side began to abuse Sitanov. "Now you've spoiled it. Our Cossack would have beat him this time; so you have to see to it that our side stays on the loser's end!" They kept this up until Sitanov cried out, "Oh, you dopes!" and startled everybody by himself challenging the Mordvin. The latter, jokingly brandishing his fists, said, "Come, let's kill each other!"

A ring was formed by people linking hands and spreading out in a wide circle. The boxers faced each other, right hand out and left to their breasts. The more knowing in the audience took note that Sitanov's arms had a longer reach than the Mordvin's. It was very still; all that was audible was the crunching of snow under the boxers' feet. One impatient on-looker demanded, "Start mixing it!"

Sitanov probed with his right; the Mordvin blocked with his left, and Sitanov got in a left under the Mordvin's right arm that made the latter grunt. As he drew back, he said good-naturedly, "He's young, but he's no fool."

Now they waded in, trading heavy punches on the chest. Before long, even people on the other side were rooting for Sitanov, "That's the stuff, icon painter! Give it to him, en graver!"

The Mordvin was heavier and slower and took two or three punches to one of his; but he was the stronger and well-seasoned, and did not suffer much, and laughed and bantered, and suddenly with an upswinging punch, dislocated Sitanov's right arm at the shoulder.

"It's a draw; separate them," came from the onlookers, as they broke their circle and crowded around the contestants. The good-natured Mordvin said, "The icon painter's not too strong; but he's smart. I'll tell the world, he'll be a good ringman."

While the rest got into a free-for-all wrestling match, I took Sitanov to the *feldsher*.³³ What he had done had increased my respect and affection for him. A straightforward and honorable man, he had done what he had considered his duty; but the sloven-soul, Kapendiukhin, ridiculed him, "Showoff! Shining up that soul of yours like a samovar on holiday eve, bragging, 'See how bright it shines!' But it's nothing but brass, that soul of yours, and rusty at that!"

Sitanov ignored the taunts, sticking to his work and using his spare time to copy Lermontov into his scrapbook. When I asked him, "Since you have the money, why don't you buy the book?" he replied, "I prefer having it in my own handwriting."

When a page had been filled in his minute and graceful script, he would recite in a low voice, till the ink dried, "Having no part in it, feeling no regret, you will look down upon this earth where happiness is a mirage, and beauty is fleeting."

With eyes half-shut, he said, "How true! That man knew!" Sitanov's forbearance toward Kapendiukhin astonished me. When he was drunk the Cossack became quarrelsome, and Sitanov would fend off provocations with placating words, "Enough; let me be." Yet, in the end, he would turn on the drunkard so savagely that the other workmen, who enjoyed such brawls among themselves as spectacles, would intervene, explaining, "If we didn't stop Eugene, he would kill Kapendiukhin or anyone, and then he'd never forgive himself."

When sober, Kapendiukhin baited Sitanov incessantly, jeering at Sitanov's interest in poetry, making coarse allusions to his unhappy love affair, and attempting vainly to incite him to jealous rages. Sitanov took it all silently, seemingly without resentment, sometimes even joining Kapendiukhin in self-mocking laughter.

³³A medical practitioner without degree who performed simple medication and surgery.

They slept beside each other, spending part of the night in whispers and keeping me awake as well, consumed as I was with curiosity over what could be the mutual interest of such an ill-matched pair. But whenever I edged closer, the Cossack would push me off with, "What are you after?" Sitanov didn't even seem to notice.

Once, however, they summoned me over, and the Cossack inquired, "What would you do if you had a lot of money?"

"I'd buy books."

"And then what?"

"I don't know."

Kapendiukhin gave an exclamation of disgust and turned away, while Sitanov remarked, "You see, young or old, nobody can say. In itself, money's nothing except where it's put to some use."

"What are you discussing?" I asked.

"We just prefer talking to sleeping," the Cossack replied shortly.

After hearing more of their conversations, I found that they were no different from daytime conversations, that they had the usual subjects of God, truth, happiness, the wiles and follies of women, the cupidity of the wealthy, and the complexity and mystery of life. I was an eager listener-in, getting great stimulation out of such conversation. And I observed with satisfaction that almost everybody came to the same conclusions about our life, namely, that it was evil and should be made better. I observed, too, that their desire for a better life was futile, would lead to no improvement of their conditions, or in their dealings with one another. These discussions, at the same time as they illuminated the life around me, lit up an empty and gloomy horizon beyond; and, across this vacant horizon drifted, like dust particles on a windswept pond, grotesque and irritable people, among them the very ones who called the people an insensate crowd. Opinions came so easy to them, they were so ready to condemn others, to show off, to repeat commonplaces, to rush into quarrels over nothing, to insult each other. They speculated on conditions after death, while the flooring under the washstand where they stood, rotted

through, and up the hole rose a chill damp that froze our feet, and a sour, fetid earth smell. Paul and I did what we could to stop up the hole with straw and rags, but the hole gained on us, and, in bad weather, the smell was like sewer fumes. Everybody agreed new flooring should be laid there, but in the meanwhile, the draft gave us all colds and coughs. Then the tin mechanism of the little ventilator panel in one of our winter windows began rasping, and everybody complained. But after it had been oiled, Zhikharev grumbled, "It's more boring now that the ventilator's quiet."

To return from a bath to a dirty bed, and lie there in dust and stenches, seemed not to distress any of them. Many little things, whose accumulation made for intolerable conditions, could have been altered with little trouble, but no one bothered to. I heard them say, "No one cares about human beings; God doesn't; and not human beings themselves."

When Paul and I took the trouble to bathe Davidov, who was on the point of death and whose body was being consumed by parasites and filth, our efforts brought us hosts of laughter from the others. They pulled off their shirts and offered them to us for delousing. From their jibes, you'd think we were doing a silly thing, something to be ashamed of.

From Christmas till Lent, Davidov coughed and spat blood which, if he missed the wash basin, spattered the floor. At night he kept us awake with delirious shrieks. And every day, the talk went, "Let's get him to the hospital!" But one obstacle was that Davidov's passport had lapsed. Then his condition eased a bit, and they said, "It's nothing; and he'll die any day now, anyway." Davidov himself said, "I'll be off soon." He had a dry humor with which he sought to break the tedium. He would stick out his shadowy and emaciated face, and wheeze out such songs as: "Hear ye, people, to the voice of one above; the attic's my home; my day begins early; and cock-roaches feed on me, awake or asleep."

"He keeps chipper," applauded his audience.

When Paul and I went to him he joked, no matter what the effort cost him. "What'll you have, dear guests; how about a fresh little spider?"

His death was slow and he wearied of it, remarking with frank exasperation, "It's an affliction! I don't seem to be able to die!"

His indifference to death awed Paul. One night Paul roused me to whisper, "Alex, looks like he's dying now; supposing he dies, right there above us. God, I'm scared of dead people!" Or he'd comment, "He was born—but what for? He's not reached twenty-two, and here he's dying!"

One moonlit night he got up and, with eyes wide with fright, called to me, "Listen!" Davidov, in the garret, was croaking out, "Give me it, give—" And then went into a fit of hiccoughs.

"By God, see? Now he's dying," said Paul, trembling.

I had been shoveling snow out of the yard all day and was exhausted, but Paul pleaded, "Please, for God's sake, don't sleep." And suddenly, getting up on his knees, he gave a frantic cry, "Get up! Davidov is dead!"

Some of the workers awoke; some stumbled out of bed; there were questions from growling voices. Kapendiukhin climbed into the loft and said, astonished, "He's dead, all right, though he's still warm."

In the ensuing stillness Zhikharev, wrapping himself in a blanket, said, "Now he's in the kingdom of heaven."

Someone suggested, "Let's put him out in the hallway."

Kapendiukhin climbed down from the loft and looked out of the window. "Let him be till in the morning. He was no harm to anybody when he was alive."

Paul lay sobbing, his head hid under his pillow.

Through it all, Sitanov slept.

Chapter Fifteen

THE SNOW THAWED OFF THE FIELDS; THE WINTER CLOUDS LEFT the sky. Now, when snow fell, it was damp, and alternated with rain. The sun loitered on his day's journey. The air grew mild. Gay spring seemed to be hiding flirtatiously in the fields, before bursting into town. The streets became brown with mud, and the gutters streamed. Over the thaws on Arestansky Square giddy sparrows skipped. And, like the sparrows, human beings livened up. The almost continuous Lenten chimes outvoiced the other spring sounds, their hollow beats striking on one's heart. In that tolling, as in the tones of the elderly, there was a note of reproach, as if the bells were saying, sad and aloof, "Been-o, all has been, been-o."

On my name day³⁴ the craftsmen gave me an exquisitely done icon of Alexei, Man of God; and well I remember Zhikharev's solemn presentation speech. "What are you?" he began, wagging fingers and eyebrows, "just a kid, a thirteen-year-old orphan; and I, a man about four times your age, speak your praises and command you for standing with your face toward people and not aloof. Stay like that toward people and you'll be all right!" He went on about people and about slaves of God, but I could not distinguish between his "slaves" and his "people," and neither, I think, could he. He rambled on till the others began laughing at him, while I stood there, holding my gift, deeply stirred but embarrassed. Finally Kapendiukhin broke in, exasperated, "Oh, quit that gush! You're turning his ears blue."

Giving me a whack on my back, he launched on praises of his own. "Where you're worth praising is where you're like

³⁴The name day, or saint's day, was celebrated in Russian custom, like the birthday.

other people; not what makes it hard to give you a scolding or a beating when you've earned it!"

They were all kind to me, taking advantage of my embarrassment with gentle ribbing. I could barely keep from bursting into tears of joy over finding myself esteemed by them. Only that morning the shop manager had remarked to the appraiser, with a gesture toward me, "There's an unlikely, worthless lad for you!"

I had gone off to the store that morning, as usual. At noon the manager ordered, "Go back to the house; clear off the snow from the storehouse roof and get the cellar clean!"

He didn't know it was my name day and I wasn't aware that anyone else knew. When the felicitations were over in the workrooms, I got into work clothes, and climbed up the roof of the shed to shovel off the snow winter had piled on it. In my excitement I forgot to shut the cellar door, and later found that I had filled the cellar with snow. When I got down and saw it, I immediately set to clearing the cellar doorway. The thawing snow was heavy; it made slow work for my wooden shovel—we had no metal one. I broke the shovel just as the manager was opening the yard gate. There and then the aptness of the Russian proverb, "Misery dogs the heels of joy," was demonstrated to me.

"Sol!" jeered the manager. "What a worker you are, damn you! Just let me get my hands on you, you numskull!" and he threatened me with the broken part of the shovel.

Backing away I retorted, "I wasn't hired as a porter!"

He threw the piece of wood at my shins and I retaliated with a snowball smack in his face. He went off snorting; I dropped my shoveling and returned to the workrooms. In no time his fiancée, a noisy girl with a vacant, pimply face, burst in. "Alex, you're wanted upstairs!"

"I'm not going," I replied.

"Not going?" asked Larionovich, astounded. "What do you mean?"

I told him what had happened and he went upstairs, frowning anxiously, and grumbling at me, "Impudent kid!"

The workrooms echoed with curses at the manager. Kapendiukhin said, "They'll certainly kick you out for this!"

I felt no uneasiness on that score. My relations with the manager had reached the breaking point. He took no trouble to hide his animosity, which grew sharper every day, while my aversion toward him kept pace. But his absurd behavior toward me mystified me. He would scatter small coins over the floor which I found when sweeping, and put into the cup kept on the counter for beggars. Guessing that he did this to catch me, I said, "You're dropping the coins at my feet on purpose."

Flaring up, he gave himself away. "Don't you dare tell me what to do! I know what I'm doing!" Immediately he corrected himself, "What do you mean, my throwing money around on purpose? It just drops by accident."

I was forbidden to read the books in the store. "That's nothing for you to bother your head about. Thinking of becoming an appraiser, you loafer?"

He persisted in trying to frame me in a theft of a coin. It was clear to me that, should I happen to sweep one of the dropped coins into a crack, he would accuse me of stealing it; and I reminded him that I was onto his game. That very day, however, on returning from the tavern with the hot water for tea, I overheard him prompting a new salesman in the shop next door, "Get him to steal some psalters; we're putting in a new stock." From their constrained look as I came in, it was obvious that I had been the subject of their conversation; and, from other signs, I had additional reasons for suspecting them of some idiotic plot against me.

That salesman, as a matter of fact, was not really a new man there. He was considered a shrewd salesman; but he had a weakness for drink. After one of his sprees, he had been discharged, but his boss had recently taken him back. He was a frail, bloodless fellow with crafty eyes. Slavishly subservient to his boss, he went about, smiling secretly and cleverly into his beard, and uttering ironic remarks. From him, though his own teeth were white and strong, came the characteristic odor of dental decay.

He gave me a shock one day, by approaching me with an amiable smile, then suddenly knocking off my cap and grabbing me by the hair. I did my best to twist out of his grip, but was dragged from the arcade into the store, where he tried to

get me to knock against the icons. Had he managed it, I would have cracked a glass frame, or damaged the embossing, or scratched up some expensive item. But he was too feeble, and I was soon on top when, to my astonishment, this grown man sat on the floor, rubbed his skinned nose, and wept.

The next morning, when we happened to be alone, still nursing battle bruises on his nose and around his eye, he told me amicably, "D'you think I wanted to attack you yesterday? I'm not such a fool. I knew you'd get the better of me. I have no strength. I'm a souse. Your boss made me do it. 'Fix it so he'll break something while you're fighting.' I'd never have done it on my own. Look what decorations you've given my mug."

I believed him and felt sorry for him. I knew the poor, half-starved wretch was also knocked about by the woman he lived with. But I asked him, "And if he asked you to poison somebody, would you do it?"

"He might, at that," said the salesman with a pallid smile, "that's not beyond him." Later he asked me, "Look, I'm broke. There isn't a crust of bread in the house, and my missus is carrying on. Couldn't you slip me a piece out of your stock, an icon or a breviary, and let me have it to sell on the side? Just as a favor to a friend, what?"

This recalled to me the shoe store and the church beadle, and I wondered, "Will he give me away?" But I couldn't refuse him, and gave him a cheap icon. A breviary worth several rubles seemed too much, made the crime seem too big. Arithmetic always lies hidden in morality. The sanctimonious naïveté of the "Regulations for the Punishment of Criminals" bares the pretenses behind which the big lie of property masks itself.

So, overhearing my boss urging this man to get me to steal psalters, I felt frightened. He must have known of my previous charity; the salesman must have blabbed about the icon. Realizing the unseemliness of dispensing charity with somebody else's goods, and the foul trap that was being prepared for me, made me sick of myself and of them all. I was in torment until the consignment of breviaries was delivered. When I was storing them away, the salesman from next door came in to beg for one.

"You told the boss about the icon, didn't you?" I asked him.

"Yes," he replied, in a mournful tone. "I just can't hold anything back."

Completely at a loss, I sat down and turned a stupefied stare upon him. In miserable, desperate, uncontrollable frankness he continued, "You see, your boss, I mean mine, guessed it, and he told your boss——"

I thought it was all up with me; I was in the plotter's trap and could expect my next lodging to be at the reformatory. So, what did it matter? If you drowned, it was less humiliating to drown where it was deep. I put a breviary in the salesman's hands. He tucked it into a coat sleeve and went off; but suddenly, he was back; the breviary tumbled on my feet; and he went away again, exclaiming, "No! If I took it, you'd be finished."

This mystified me. Why would I be finished? Nevertheless, I was relieved that he had left without the breviary. But the incident intensified the boss' antagonism toward me.

All this was in my mind when Larionovich went to intervene. He was there only a short time, and returned, dejected and silent. Just before our evening meal he took me aside and told me, "I tried to fix it for you to put in all your time here, and not go to the store, but Kuzka won't hear of it. He's certainly got it in for you!"

The fact was, I had an enemy here, too, the loose wench who was the boss' fiancée. The younger workmen all took liberties with her. Catching her in the hallway, they handled her; and all the objection she made was to squeal with delight, like a puppy. This wench kept stuffing herself day and night, her jaws going incessantly and her pockets crammed with sweets. The look of her shifty eyes on her vacuous face was repellent. She was always plaguing Paul and me with riddles, the answers to which implied something indecent; and she was always repeating phrases which, when rapidly spoken, formed lewd words.

Once, one of the older men remarked to her, "You're nothing but a tart!" To which she promptly replied, in a vulgar couplet then current, "The maid who's a prude won't be wooed."

It was my first contact with that kind of a girl. Her crude frisking disgusted and embarrassed me. This distaste for her capers won me her hostility. Once, Paul and I were in the cellar with her, helping her steam out pickling tubs, when she proposed, "How about my teaching you boys how to kiss?"

Paul answered, "I'm as good at it as you," while I suggested that she save her kisses for her husband-to-be; and I did not put it in very formal terms. Enraged, she said, "You animal! A young lady tries to be nice to him and he turns squeamish, the dope!" And, shaking a warning finger at me, she added, "I'll remember this, you see!"

Paul took my part. He said, "You'd get it from your intended if he knew how you were carrying on."

She made a face. "I'm not scared of him. I got a dowry. I'm better class than he is. Besides, a girl can have fun only till she's married."

From then on, she horsed around with Paul, while toward me she showed a tireless malice.

In the store, life became steadily more burdensome. I read church books whenever I could; but religious disputation had lost its savor for me; the same arguments were repeated in the same phrases. Only old Peter continued to interest me, for his perceptions into the depths of human behavior, and his way of making things interesting and vivid. There were moments when I thought he might be the prophet Elijah, revisiting the earth and condemning it. Every time, however, that I was candid with the old man about the people around me, or gave any free expression to my ideas, he passed it on to my boss, and won me a scolding or a ribbing.

Once I remarked to the old man that I had copied some of his sayings into my scrapbook. He was greatly disturbed by this, quietly limped over to me and plied me with anxious questions, "What for, my boy? It's a waste of time. You want to remember that? Forget it. What a queer one you are! You're going to let me have what you've written, eh?" And he persisted in attempts to induce me either to let him have my scrapbook, or to destroy it myself; and he spoke about it, in agitated whispers, to my boss.

On our way home the latter remarked, "This note-taking of

yours has got to stop, understand? That's something only sleuths do."

Heedlessly I said, "What about Sitanov? He keeps a scrapbook, too!"

"That stringbean, too?" After a silence he said, with an amiability foreign to him, "Look here; if you let me see your scrapbook, and Sitanov's as well—on the quiet, naturally, so he won't know—I'll give you half a ruble."

He must have counted on my doing it, for he had nothing more to say to me, and trotted ahead on his stubby legs. On reaching the house I told Sitanov what the boss had plotted. With a scowl, Sitanov said, "That's what your blabbing gets us. Now he'll have somebody sneak away both our scrapbooks. Let me have yours. I'll hide them. And see if he doesn't send you packing soon!"

I had no doubt about that, myself, and made up my mind to quit when grandma got back to town. She had spent the winter at Balakhaya, teaching lace-making to girl apprentices. Grandpa had moved back to Kunavin Street, but I didn't visit him; and when he came out our way, he never stopped in to see me. Once we met in the street. He was in his raccoon coat and his gait was slow and pompous. I greeted him and he put up his hands to shade his eyes, so he could see me better, squinted at me and said, weightily, "Oh, it's you; so now, you're an icon painter. Well, that's good; run along." And, nudging me aside, he went his slow, self-important way.

I saw little of grandma. She was working herself to the bone, not only to support grandpa, who had become helplessly senile, but my Uncle Mike's neglected children as well. Of the latter, Sascha was her chief care. He had turned out a handsome youth, but a dreamy book-lover. He worked in dye-shops, shifting from place to place, and between changes, loaded himself onto grandma's shoulders, leaving it to her to get him a new job. Fastened on her shoulders, too, was Sascha's sister, who had married a drunkard who beat her, and drove her out of the house.

Every time I met grandma, I was more conscious of the charm of her personality. But I realized that her gorgeous soul, bedazzled with fantasies, was incapable of clear vision. could

not comprehend life's harsh realities; therefore my tension and unease mystified her.

"Patience, Alex!" This was all she could offer when I told her of the revolting conditions, of the miseries, of the agonies I saw around me, and which astounded me and made me boil. I was not the patient kind, however, and on the occasions I practiced that virtue of cattle, trees and stones, it was to discipline myself, or to test my endurance or stability. In their ignorant youth people sometimes attempt feats that overstrain their muscles and bones; they will seek enviously, in tests with heavy weights, to match fully-developed adults, known for their strength.

I had a double share of this weakness—I strained my spiritual, as well as my physical, powers, and it was a matter of luck that I did not overstrain myself and blast my life with some deformity. Nevertheless, worse disfigurements of one's life are incurred by patience, by submitting one's powers to the pressures about one. If I wind up a disfigured corpse, I can take pride that, to the very end, good people, despite all their efforts, failed to mutilate my soul.

My ungovernable impulses toward wild pranks, to entertain people and extort their laughter, became ever stronger. And I had successes. In my descriptions of a business day among the icons, I impersonated the shopkeepers, the peasant customers, the wrangling appraisers; I showed how all plied the tricks of their trade. Laughter echoed through the workrooms; and some of the craftsmen would leave their tables to have a better look; and then Larionovich would say, "Better wait till after supper to do your acting, or you'll keep us all from our work."

After a performance I felt relaxed, as if I had thrown off a load. For upwards of an hour my head felt clear and light; but then the sensation of small, pointed nails moving in my skin would return; and I would feel as though I was stewing in some stinking mess, in which I was slowly being boiled down. Is this what life is, I wondered? Was I doomed to live like these people, never to reach, never to see anything beyond?

Zhikharev would stare at me. "Why the sulks?" And Sitanov would ask, "What's bothering you?" And I had no answers.

The turbulent and incessant waters of life splashed at the

most sensitive inscriptions in my soul, blurring them into wishful nonsense; and, wrathful and resolute, I resisted the violation. We were all afloat on that stream; but for me the current was icier and I was less buoyant in it; so that, at times, I felt pulled down into measureless abysses.

Not that I suffered from ill treatment. I was not shouted at or nagged as Paul was; I was always properly addressed by name, to emphasize the respect in which I was held. This was satisfying. But it tormented me to see so many of the people taking to drink and becoming repulsive; and to see them make their relations with women a noxious thing; yet I realized that women and vodka were the relaxation life offered them.

It grieved me to realize that that warm-hearted, fearless, and clear-minded woman, Natalie Kozlovsky, was also dismissed as a loose woman. And what of grandma? And Queen Margot? The latter, when I thought of her, filled me with awe. She had become as remote as a dream.

Women, in fact, were too much on my mind, and I was considering the question, shall I accompany the others on their next holiday dissipation? Not out of physical desire. I was robust, but choosy; the desire with which I burned was to hold close someone who was tender and understanding, to whom I could spontaneously and freely, as to a mother, pour out the fermentations in my soul.

Paul had taken up with a housemaid who worked in the building across the way, and his reports made me envious. "It's funny, pal. A while ago I didn't like her at all, and I snowballed her; now we sit on a bench together; and I hug her and love her more than anybody."

"What do you talk about?"

"About everything; she tells me about herself, and I tell her about myself; then we kiss; only she's decent. To tell you the truth, pal, that's the trouble; she's too good. Man, you're smoking like an old campaigner."

I smoked heavily; tobacco drugged me, was sedative to my agitation and restlessness. Vodka, however, only made me nauseated with my own smell and taste. Paul, however, took to it. When he got drunk he bawled, "I want to go home; let me go home!" though, so far as I knew, he was an orphan, without

brother or sister. His parents had died years ago, and for eight years he had lived with strangers.

Spring's calls were particularly potent to me in this state of agitation and discontent. I resolved to take a job on a ship again, and if there was a stop at Astrakhan, to run off to Persia. Why Persia, I cannot now recall. Perhaps, because I had been impressed by the Persian merchants at the Fair grounds, placid as marble images, their dyed beards spread in the sun, serenely smoking their bubble pipes, and looking around them with big, black, knowing eyes.

I would surely have run off somewhere; but one Easter day, when some of the craftsmen had gone off to their homes and the rest were in the taverns, I was sunning myself along the banks of the Oka, when my old boss, grandma's nephew, came along. He was in a gray topcoat, his hands in his pocket, a cigarette between his lips, his hat back on his head. On seeing me a warm smile immediately overspread his amiable face. He had the look of a free and happy man. "Ah, Peshkov, Christ is risen!" ³⁵ he greeted me.

After we had given each other the Easter kiss he asked how I was getting on, and I made no bones about my disgust with my job, the town, and everything, and spoke of my plans to go to Persia. "Get that out of your mind," he advised me. "What on earth do you think you'll find in Persia? I know just how you feel, brother; at your age I, too, had the wanderlust."

I liked him for talking to me in this manner. His natural goodness was freshened by the touch of spring; he was different from the rest. "Smoke?" he asked, holding out a silver cigarette case stuffed with plump cigarettes. And that sealed his victory.

"Better come back to a job with me," he proposed. "This year I have contracts for new Fair buildings. I can use you there, a sort of overseer. You can check on the material as it's delivered, see that it's stacked properly, and keep an eye on it so the subcontractors don't make off with it. How about it? I'll pay you five rubles a month, and five kopecks for your meals. The women won't bother you. You'll leave in the morning, and come back at night. Pay no attention to them. But don't let

³⁵ The customary Russian Easter greeting.

them know about this talk; just drop in Sunday, at Fonin Street. I think it'll work out fine!"

We parted like old friends, with a warm handshake, and he waved his hat to me when I looked back.

When I let it be known in the workrooms that I was leaving, most of the craftsmen expressed flattering regrets. Paul, particularly, was dejected. He tried to dissuade me. "Living among all those boors, after us! Carpenters and house painters! Ah, you! That's going from bad to worse!"

Zhikharev grumbled, "A fish finds the deepest place; this clever one hunts up a worse place!"

I was given a mournful sendoff. "Naturally, one must try everything," said Zhikharev, whose last spree had left him looking jaundiced. "And it's better to do it right away, before you get too tied down."

"Tied down for life!" said Larionovich, in a low voice.

Nevertheless, I felt that what they said was prompted by constraint and a sense of obligation. The thread by which I had been bound to them had somehow rotted through.

In the loft above, the drunken Goloviev thrashed about and ranted, "I'd stick them all in jail! I know all about them. Who's a believer here? Aah——!"

And the usual unfinished icons stared, faceless, from the wall. The glass globes were high up under the ceiling. For some time we had been working in natural light, and the unused globes had acquired a grayish film of soot and dust. This setting is all so vivid in my memory that, with my eyes shut, I can see it all, every table, the paint jars on the sills, the brushes tied in bunches, the icons, the refuse can shaped like a fireman's helmet under the brass washstand, and dangling from the loft, Goloviev's bare foot, blue like that of a corpse pulled out of the water.

I tried to shorten the parting, but Russians love to prolong sad occasions. Their good-bys have the solemnity of requiems.

Zhikharev, with a flick of his brows, said to me, "That book—the devil book—I can't return it to you. I'll give you two greven for it."

The book was mine; the old fire-patrol officer had made me a gift of it, and I wanted to take Lermontov with me. But when

I showed offense at being offered money, Zhikharev coolly put the coins in his pocket and said, positively, "Money or not, I won't let you have it back. It's not good for you. A book like that would smooth your way to sin."

"But it's on sale in the stores; I've seen it."

However, this only increased his obstinacy. "So what? They sell revolvers in stores, too." And I never got Lermontov back from him.

On my way upstairs to say good-by to the woman who owned the workshop, I ran into her niece.

"Are you really leaving, as I'm told?"

"Yes."

"If you hadn't gone by yourself, you'd have been kicked out, anyway," she said, with candor if not with kindness.

And the drunken owner said, "Good-by; God be with you, you bad, impudent boy. I've never found you so, but that's what they tell me." Suddenly she broke into tears and blubbered, "If my dead husband, the good, dear soul, had been here he would have known how to handle you. He would have beat you and we could have kept you. We shouldn't have had to fire you! But nowadays, things are awry. If everything isn't to your taste, off you go! Ah, boy; where will you land? What's the good of knocking around?"

Chapter Sixteen

I WAS ROWING MY BOSS THROUGH THE FLOODED FAIR GROUNDS where the water had risen to the second story. His paddle made a poor rudder, and we zigzagged through the sleepy streets over the muddy, still water.

"Damn it, the flood's still rising! It's holding up the work!" my boss grumbled, as he smoked a cigar that gave off the aroma of scorched rags. "Careful!" he exclaimed, "we're going into a lamppost!"

Righting the boat he cursed. "Some boat the bastards gave us!"

He showed me the site of his construction job. His face close-shaved until it was blue, his moustache trimmed, and a cigar between his lips, he did not look like an architect. He was in a leather jacket; he was booted to the knees; a game-bag hung from his shoulder, and at his feet lay a costly double-barreled gun of the famous Lebel make. He was restless. Every now and then he pulled his leather cap over his eyes, pursed his lips and cautiously looked around; then he'd push his cap back on his head and smile as if diverted by a pleasant thought. He looked years younger. No one would have imagined him then as a man burdened with responsibilities, concerned over the failure of the flood waters to subside. It was clear that the thoughts flitting through his mind had no connection with business.

As for myself, I was mute with astonishment. It was strange to see that dead community, its submerged blocks with all the windows down. The flooded city seemed afloat. The sun was deep in the clouds of the gray sky, but here and there, in broad, silvery patches of wintry light, it broke through.

Gray and chill, too, was the water, whose current was imperceptible. It seemed to have jelled, to have been pasted down, like the vacant houses in dirty yellow paint, that stood beside

the stores. When the pallid sun peered out of a cloud, everything brightened. The gray water reflected the gray sky, with our boat seemingly suspended between the two. Even the rearing stone buildings seemed to be afloat toward the Volga or the Oka River. Around the boat drifted broken barrels, crates, baskets, wood fragments and straw. Some wooden rods or limbs, afloat on the surface, looked like dead snakes.

At intervals an open window would be seen. On the roofs of arcades, wash was drying, or felt boots protruded. From one of the open windows a woman stared into the gray water. Moored to one of the submerged iron pillars of an arcade was a red boat, whose reflections in the water looked like greasy cuts of meat.

Nodding toward these manifestations of life, my boss explained, "Here's where the market watchman lives. From the window he climbs out on the roof; from the roof he boards his boat; he rows around looking for thieves; and if there are none around, *he* does the stealing."

His phrases idled, his mind on something else. Everything around us was silent, vacant, unreal, like something in a dream. The confluence of the Volga and the Oka had broadened into an enormous lake. On the higher ground the city gleamed in varied colors. Gardens were still bare, but the trees were budding, and warm mantles of young green enfolded churches and houses. Over the water stole the muffled Easter chimes. The sounds from the town drifted here as living sounds drift into a cemetery.

Now our boat threaded between rows of dark trees. We were over the highway to the cathedral, the wind now against us and blowing the acrid cigar smoke back in my boss' face, and into his eyes; he lost control of the boat, which rammed a tree; and, startled and vexed, he cried out, "Some boat!"

"But you're not steering!"

"How can I?" he complained. "When there are two in a boat, one rows and the other steers—if he can. Look, there's the Chinese block!"

I knew the Fair grounds thoroughly; especially that absurd block with a grotesque roof where plaster Chinese sat cross-legged. Many a time my pals and I had stoned the figures.

and some had had their faces and limbs nicked by me. But I no longer vaunted such exploits.

Pointing to it, my boss said, "What crap! If the designs—" He whistled and pushed his cap back off his head. But I felt that, if it had been up to him, that stone town would have been just as drab, there on the low ground, flooded every year by two rivers. He would have provided the Chinese block, too.

Pitching his cigar over the side, he spat after it disgustedly. "Life's a bore, Peshkov, a bore. There are no cultivated people to talk to. You want to display your talents—but to whom? Who've you got here? Carpenters, bricklayers, clods—"

He stared at the white mosque, which perched on a small hill. He spoke as if probing his memory for something forgotten. "I took to beer and cigars when I was working for a German. They're a practical race, the wild geese! Beer's a good drink, but I've never got used to the cigars. After you've had one, your wife nags, 'What's that smell? You reek like a harness-maker!' I tell you, brother, the longer we live the worse cheats we become. But—true to yourself—"

Resting his paddle he took up his gun and fired at one of the Chinese figures. It suffered no harm; the pellets lodged in the roof and the wall, and raised dust. "I missed," he admitted without hesitation, and reloaded. "Getting along with the girls? Don't you chase them? I was in love at thirteen!" And, as if telling me a dream, he recalled his first love, a servant girl in the household of the architect where he had served his apprenticeship. The gray water washed softly against the protuberances of the buildings; past the cathedral stretched a desert of water with outcrops of black twigs. I recalled the seminarist's song, which we had often sung in the icon shop. "Oh, stormy blue sea . . ." That blue sea must have been a bore.

"I couldn't sleep," my boss went on. "Sometimes I got out of bed and stood shivering outside her door, like a dog. How cold that house was! My boss came to her at night. He might have caught me but I didn't care." He spoke in a preoccupied way, like someone examining an old coat to see if it were good for another season. "She knew and was sorry for me, and called to me, 'Little fool, come in!'"

How many such stories I had heard; and how banal, though

they had one virtue in common: stories of "first love" were all told without brag or lewdness, and usually with such tender melancholy that I gathered that first loves are the best.

Laughing and tossing his head, my boss wondered aloud, "But can you tell such a thing to your wife? No. What harm is there in it? But you never do. That's a tale . . ."

He was telling himself the story, not me. Had he stopped I would have started talking. In that stillness and desert, one had to speak, sing, play the accordion—or risk falling into leaden, lasting sleep in the center of a drowned city, lying under icy, gray water.

"Above all, don't marry early," my boss advised. "Marriage settles you for life. Now you can live at will, where and how you please. You can be a Mohammedan in Persia, or raise hell in Moscow. You can plan your life to suit your own preferences. You can have a taste of everything. But, brother, when you marry, you marry the weather; there's no way to control a wife. And you can't get rid of a wife like an old shoe!" A change had come into his face. His face was drawn, now, as he looked into the gray water. He scratched his long nose and said, "Yes, indeed, brother, look before you leap. Suppose you're harassed on all sides, yet you stand firm. You think you've ridden out the danger? But there's a special trap for you—one for each of us."

We were now in the reeds of Meshchersky Lake, a back-water of the Volga. "Sh-sh!" whispered the boss, leveling his gun at the bushes. After he had bagged a few famished wood-cocks, he proposed, "Let's go to Kunavin Street. I'll stay there overnight. You go on home and tell them I was detained by contractors."

He got out in a street on the outskirts, which was also flooded; and I went back to the Fair ground on the Stravelka, where I tied up the boat, and sat in it, gazing at the point where the two rivers met, at the moored steamers, at the sky which was like a gigantic, beautiful bird-wing—all white, feathery clouds. Between blue rifts gleamed the sun, each glance transfiguring the earth and everything upon it. Here, things were lively. The currents were swifter. In the flotsam they carried along were floats of timber, poled by peasants, who

shouted warnings to one another or to passing steamers. A tug was hauling an empty barge upstream, with the river pulling back of it, shaking it, while it forced its nose like a pike, panted, and gritted its wheels against the onrushing tide. On a barge, their legs dangling over its side, four peasants sat huddled together, one, in a red blouse singing a tune I recognized, though I could not hear the words.

I felt that here on the living river, I knew everything, was in contact with everything, understood everything. The flooded town behind me was only a bad dream, one of my boss' fantasies, as impossible to account for as himself. When I was sated with what I saw, I went home, feeling grownup and competent for any task. On my way back, I stopped on the Kremlin²⁶ hill for its view of the Volga. As seen from the hill the earth seemed infinite, and to promise satisfaction of every desire.

At home I now had books. Queen Margot's apartment was now tenanted by a large family, five young ladies, each prettier than the other, and two schoolboys from whom I borrowed books. I was enraptured with Turgenev, enjoying his directness, his intelligibility, his autumnal clarity, the purity of his characters, the nobility of his observations. I read Pomyalovsky's *The Stockmarket*, and found the operations it depicted startlingly like those in the icon store. I was reminded both of the malicious practical jokes I had seen played there and the suffocating boredom which provoked them. The Russian books absorbed me. They had the intimate melancholy I knew; it was as if, on opening the book, I immediately heard muted, frosty Lenten bells, concealed within.

Dead Soul's I turned to with reluctance, as well as *The House of the Dead*. Books with such titles—*Dead Souls*, *Dead Houses*, *Three Deaths*, *Living Relics*—though they won unwilling attention from me, were read with a sort of torpid antipathy toward them all. From *Signs of the Times*, *Step by Step*, *What to Do*, *Chronicles of the Village of Smurin*, and other such tendentious works, I got little pleasure. Dickens and Scott delighted me, and I reread their works many times. The latter

²⁶ The central citadel, usually walled, of most ancient Russian cities, was called the Kremlin.

made me think of festival services in wealthy cathedrals, a little overlong and wearying, but always impressive. To Dickens I continue to bow for his astounding facility in that most difficult of artistic achievements—a loving understanding of human nature.

At night there were gatherings on the roof. They included the brothers K. and their grown-up sisters and Vyaches'av Semashko, the schoolboy with the turned-up nose. At times Miss Ptitzin, daughter of a high-ranking official, joined us. The talk was literary, which I enjoyed, and was within my province, since I was better read than any of them. When the talk turned to school and the tyrannical teachers I felt freer than they and was astounded at their submission. At the same time I envied them their schooling.

Though my companions were older, I felt more mature. I was more experienced and more alert. This somewhat distressed me; I would have preferred to feel in closer rapport. I got home late, work-grimed and filled with impressions of a different life from theirs—mostly dreary. They spoke about young ladies, of being in love, and made attempts at poetry in which they sought my help. To this I willingly acceded; rhyming came easy to me though, for some reason, my verses always slipped into the comic; and I found myself irresistibly associating Miss Ptitzin, the customary subject of these verses, with fruits and vegetables.

Semashko exclaimed, "Call that poetry! It's no more poetry than carpet tacks!"

Determined to keep up with them in everything, I too, paid court to Miss Ptitzin. I do not recall all the terms of my declaration, but it had a bad ending. In stagnant Zvezdin Pond there was a log on which I offered the lady a ride. I managed to pull the log ashore; it bore my weight well. However, when the fashionable Miss Ptitzin boarded it and I, with a flourish of my pole, pushed off, the cursed log tipped over, sending her headfirst into the water. Gallantly I dove in after her and quickly fished her out. The shock and the pond's green slime both marred her beauty. Shaking her dripping fist at me, she screamed, "You deliberately pushed me into the water!" She

brushed all my protestations aside, and from then on, was my declared enemy.

All in all, I didn't find life in the town exciting. The old woman's hostility to me was undiminished; the boss' wife held me in contempt. Victor, with a new crop of freckles, bristled at everybody, nurturing a seemingly perpetual grudge.

My boss had more work than he and his brother could handle, and took on my stepfather. Coming home early one day, and stepping into the dining room, I was startled to see this man, who had passed out of my life, sitting beside my boss, at the table. He offered me his hand, "Hello!"

I recoiled. The fire of the past, suddenly rekindled, scorched my heart. I saw a smile on a fearfully wasted face, whose dark eyes looked larger than ever. He seemed utterly spent. I put my hand in his hot, bony fingers. "So we meet again," he said, with a cough. And I went out, feeling as limp as after a flogging.

We were reserved with each other. He spoke to me as an adult and an equal. "When you go to the store, would you mind getting me a pound of La Fern tobacco, a hundred Victorson cigarette tubes, and a pound of boiled sausage?" The money I got from him was always unpleasantly warm from his hot hands. He was clearly a consumptive on his way out of this earth. This he knew and, pulling at his pointed beard, he would remark, in his deep, composed voice, "I'm quite incurable. Still, if I get plenty of meat, I may recover, I may."

And he ate incredible quantities. And cigarettes were never out of his mouth, except mealtimes. Day after day I bought him sausage, ham and sardines; at which the old woman would make opinionated and insulting comments, "What's the point —treating death to such snacks; you can't fool him."

The boss' wife also had it in for my stepfather and, with a curious note of indignation, pressed him to take this or that medicine, meanwhile ridiculing him behind his back, "Such a dainty gentleman! We should sweep up crumbs more carefully in the dining room; they breed flies, he says."

To which the old woman chimed in, "Such a gentleman

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with his coat worn to a gloss, and his forever brushing it, so fussy, can't stand a speck of dust!"

The boss would say indulgently, "Patience, you wild geese! He'll soon be in his grave!"

Their blind middle-class antipathy to him, as a man of birth, somehow drew my stepfather and me together. The crimson agaric may be a parasite, but it is beautiful. Stifling among these people, my stepfather was like a fish accidentally dropped into a chicken coop—an absurd simile; but that life was all absurdity.

I began to see resemblances in him to Good Idea—whom I had never forgotten. The finest impressions I drew from books went to adorn him and my queen. What was purest in me, distilled through my reading, I lavished on them. And so my stepfather became another alien and unloved man like Good Idea. He was impartially well-mannered to all, never interrupted, and gave brief but courteous replies when questioned. I was always tickled when he suggested changes to the boss. Bent over the table and tapping the drafting paper with his brittle nails, he would propose, "You'll have to put in a keystone here to distribute the pressure or the pillar will come through the walls."

"The devil; that's so!" the boss would exclaim. When my stepfather would step out, the boss' wife would scold, "How can you let him act the teacher toward you, like that?"

What particularly annoyed her was my stepfather's habit of brushing his teeth and gargling after supper, something which caused his Adam's apple to protrude. "I don't think it's good for you to bend your head so far back," she nagged.

"Why?" he asked, with a polite smile.

"Because . . . I just know it is."

When he started grooming his bluish nails with a small bone pick, she bridled, "There he goes, cleaning his nails again. He's dying. But he's still fussy!"

"Ekh," sighed my boss, "how stupidity fattens in you, you wild goose!" And, astonished, his wife exclaimed, "What's that for?"

At night the old woman importuned God, "Lord, now

they've laid that putrefying one on my back and they've edged Victor aside, again!"

As for Victor, he ridiculed my stepfather's manners, his easy gait, the assured movement of his aristocratic hands, his deft knotting of his ties, his fastidious table habits. Victor would ask, "How would you say, 'knee' in French?" deliberately using an overfamiliar form of address; and imperturbably, as if he were correcting a child, my stepfather would remind him of the proper form of address. "All right," Victor replied, "then how do you say 'chest'?" And he would turn to his mother, "*Ma mère, donnez-moi encore du pickles!*" and she would play to him with, "Oh, you Frenchman!" And my stepfather chewed on, without a sign, as if he had heard and seen nothing.

Once my boss said to his brother, "Since you're acquiring French, I suppose you'll be acquiring a mistress."

My stepfather smiled, the first time I saw him do so. But the boss' wife, flustered, dropped her spoon on the table, "What a disgusting remark to make in my presence!"

Now and then my stepfather came to me in the corner, where my bed was, behind the stairs leading to the attic. Usually he found me sitting on the stairs, reading under the window.

He would exhale a puff of smoke, a whistling breath following it, like the hiss of fireworks. "Reading? What's the book?"

He glanced at the title and said, "I think I've read it. Have a smoke?"

We smoked together. Staring out of the window upon the cluttered yard, he said, "A pity you're not in college. You appear to have abilities."

"I'm reading; that's studying, too."

"That's not enough. You need systematic study in school."

I suppressed an inclination to retort, "You had that advantage, old man, and to what effect?" And, as if reading my mind, he followed, "A school education can be valuable to one who's responsive. Only with a good education does a person make his mark."

Once he advised me, "You'd be better off out of this dump. I see no point, no value, in your staying here."

"I enjoy the work."

"What's there to enjoy in it?"

"It's interesting working with these people."

"You may be right."

But he remarked to me, once, "What trash these bosses of yours are!"

Recalling how and when my mother had used that word, I involuntarily recoiled. Smiling, he wanted to know, "Don't you think so?"

"I don't know."

"But they are; it's plain that they are."

"Just the same, I like the boss."

"It's true; he's a decent sort—odd, though."

I would have liked to get his opinion of books, which, however, he evidently didn't care for. Once he told me, "Don't be carried away. Things are fancied up in books, misrepresented in some ways. Writers generally are limited people, like our boss."

Opinions like these sounded bold to me, and had a demoralizing effect. During that talk, he asked, "Have you read Goncharov?"

"*The Frigate Pallada.*"

"A dull book. Yet Goncharov's our keenest writer. You ought to read his *Oblomov*; his truest and boldest book, by far; indeed, the best book Russian literature has to show."

On Dickens' novels his comment was, "Muck, I tell you," and added, "'Nova Vremya's' serializing something interesting, *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. Have you seen it? You seem to go in for stuff about the church, and you may find *The Temptation* worth looking into."

He brought me the issues containing Flaubert's erudite work, which recalled to me the endless lives of the holy men, and odds and ends of religious history I had gotten from the icon appraisers. I got more out of *The Memoirs of Upilio Famali, Lion Tamer* which appeared alongside.

When I admitted this to my stepfather, he said in his imperturbable way, "That only means you've not yet grown up to that sort of thing. Keep that book in mind."

Sometimes he would sit with me for hours, in utter silence.

smoking and coughing. I could see the consuming fire behind his beautiful eyes; and, in my surreptitious glances at this man, who was meeting death so candidly and uncomplainingly, I forgot his relationship to my mother, and how he had maltreated her. I was aware that he was living with a seamstress, for whom I felt a wondering compassion. How could she bear his cadaverous embraces, his kisses that exhaled his body's decay?

Like Good Idea, my stepfather made odd observations, "I'm crazy about hounds; they're stupid, but so beautiful; as, often, beautiful women are stupid."

With a flash of pride, I thought, "If he only knew Queen Margot!"

An observation of his that I jotted down in my scrapbook was, "When people live long in the same house, their faces all get to look the same." I waited for such observations as one waits for desserts. To hear unacknowledged, cultivated language in a house where everything said was a colorless commonplace, was refreshing.

My stepfather never referred to my mother, never even mentioning her name; and this heightened my sympathy for him.

I don't recall how the subject came up, but one day I questioned him about God. Matter-of-factly he replied, "I don't know. I have no belief in God."

This brought Sitanov to mind, and I described him to my stepfather. In the same matter-of-fact way, he said, "He has doubts; but those who doubt need something to believe. I just don't believe."

"Then, can that be?"

"But why not? You're looking at someone who doesn't believe."

I could not see anything except a dying man; and what I felt at the sight was something different from compassion. Up foremost in my feelings was a sharp and earnest interest in a man through whom I could come closer to the mystery of death.

A man sat so close to me our knees touched, warm and sentient, coolly commenting on people as he observed them in their behavior toward him, commenting in the manner of one

fully competent to make decisive judgments; a man in whom I sensed something necessary or good for me, mixed in with what was of no consequence to me. In this unfathomably complex person thoughts spun in an incessant maelstrom. I felt more than contact with him; I felt an identity with him, as if he were, somehow, living inside of me. I had him constantly on my mind; my soul felt itself under the shadow of his. Yet, in a day he would vanish, with all the riches stored in his heart and mind, with all there was to decipher in his spell-binding eyes. With his going, there would break another of my living links with life. The memory he would leave in me would be reduced to a limited and fixed thing; whereas, that which lives is infinite movement and change. And under these perceptions were incommunicable words, those which generate and nurture ideas, which tap life to its roots, peremptorily demanding, why?

One rainy day my stepfather said, "Probably I'll have to take to my bed soon. This absurd weakness. It leaves me without the will to do a thing!"

Next day, after evening tea, he took particular trouble to dispose of crumbs from his place at the table, and from his clothes, from which he seemed to be brushing off something unseen. The old woman, with a surreptitious glance, whispered to her daughter-in-law, "Look at him primping and tidying himself!"

After I had missed him from the work bench a couple of days, the old woman handed me a large, white envelope, remarking, "Here. I forgot to give it to you. It came yesterday, around noon. A woman brought it; a cute little thing, she was. What she wants with the likes of you is beyond me."

I took out a slip of paper, stamped with the name of a hospital, on which I read this, in a scrawling script: "When you can spare the time, pay me a visit. I'm in the Martinovsky Hospital. E. M."

Next morning I was in a hospital ward, sitting on a long bed in which my stepfather lay, his feet in gray, threadbare socks, sticking out between the posts. His beautiful eyes uncomprehendingly traversed the yellow walls to rest, alternately, on my face, and on the little hands, lying on his pillow, of a

girl who sat on a stool at the head of his bed. My stepfather, his mouth hanging open, rubbed his cheek against her hands. She was a plump girl in a silky, dark dress. Tears rolled slowly down her oval face; her damp blue eyes never left my stepfather's face, with its jutting cheekbones, its sharp, prominent nose and shadowed mouth.

"There ought to be a priest here," she whispered, "but he refuses, he doesn't realize." And, lifting her hands from the pillow, she laid them on her breast as though in prayer.

My stepfather recovered and looked at the ceiling with a frown, as if straining to remember something. He held out his gaunt hand to me.

"You? Thanks. And so here I am, as you see. I feel so foolish!"

Fatigued by the exertion, he shut his eyes. I touched his long, cold, blue-nailed fingers. The girl whispered, "Eugene, please introduce us."

"You must become acquainted," he said, "She's dear—"

He stopped; his mouth widened; then, suddenly, he gave a hoarse caw, like a crow. Flinging herself on the bed, clawing at the blanket, her bare arms shuddering, the girl screamed into the pillow in which she buried her head.

It was a quick death, and immediately it was over, my stepfather's good looks were restored. I left the hospital with the girl on my arm. She staggered like an invalid, weeping. Her handkerchief, balled into her hand, was alternately dabbed to her eyes, then held off and examined, as if it were her last and most prized possession. She stopped suddenly, and pressing close to me, as though for protection, she said, "I shall not live out the year. Lord, Lord! What's the meaning of it all?"

Then, holding out her hand, moist with tears, she added, "Good-by. He esteemed you. The burial is tomorrow."

"Shall I walk you home?"

"Why? It's not night."

From the corner I followed her with my eyes. Her pace was slow, like that of a person with no one to hurry to. It was August, and the leaves had begun to fall. I was unable to attend the funeral, and that was the last I saw of her.

Chapter Seventeen

MY WORKDAY ON THE FAIR GROUNDS BEGAN AT SIX. I WORKED with interesting people—gray-haired Osip, head of the carpenters' gang, who looked like Santa Claus, a deft workman with a ready wit; Yefim, the hunchback slater; pious Peter, who bossed the bricklayers, a rather solemn man who also made me think of saints; and the boss plasterer, Gregory Shishlin, a handsome, blue-eyed man with flaxen hair, who quietly radiated good will.

I had become quite well acquainted with them before. Every Sunday these peasant sub-contractors had assembled in the kitchen. I had been impressed by their appearance and manner, finding their speech pleasing, because of expressions that had a flavor new to me. These sturdy looking peasants had seemed straightforward, thoroughly good people, a wholesome change from the thievish, back-biting, drunken sort I had lived among in nearby Kunavin village.

I had been most taken with the boss plasterer, Shishlin, and had gone so far as to ask him to enroll me in his gang. But, stroking his tanned brow with a white finger, he had gently dismissed the idea. "Not yet," he had said, "the work's too hard; let it go another year." And, with a toss of his handsome head, he had said, "You don't care for the way you live here? Don't let it get you down. Make a life of your own apart from it, and you'll find it easier." Just how profitably I applied this wise counsel, I can't say, but I recall it with gratitude.

On their Sunday morning calls these people, sitting on benches around the table, had had interesting chats while waiting for the boss. His greetings, when he came in, had always been boisterous, and after handshakes all around, he had taken a seat at the head. The workers had laid their tattered ledgers

and sheafs of memoranda on the table, and the accounting for the week began. Arguing back and forth, in a stream of good-humored repartee, that only on rare occasions sharpened into acrimony, being more frequently marked by friendly laughter, my boss and they challenged each other's figures.

"Ah, for such a nice chap to be born a rascal," I heard them tell him, and he, with an embarrassed laugh, replied, "And what about your rascality, you wild geese! There's as much of it among you!"

"And what else should there be among us," Yefim said, nodding in agreement, and solemn Peter would add, "It's what we steal that we live on. What we actually earn we have to turn over to God and the Tsar."

"In that case, I'll gladly part with you as a burnt offering."

Good-humoredly they stretched out the joke, "You mean set us ablaze? Toss us into a furnace?"

And Gregory Shishlin, stroking his flowing beard down over his chest, said in a sort of chant, "Oh, brothers, let's get our business transacted without swindling. Just let's live honestly and see what peace and joy it will bring us. How about it, good people?"

At that moment, as his blue eyes glistened, and grew more intense, he appeared amazingly attractive. Apparently rocked off their balance by his appeal, the rest turned away in embarrassment.

"Peasants don't swindle much," handsome Osip remarked, sighing, as if commiserating with them.

Peter, the swarthy bricklayer, stooping over the table, said in a thick voice, "Sin's like a swamp; the further you go, the deeper you sink."

And the boss orated, "And how do I get in it? I'm lured in!"

The philosophizing over, they got back to their haggling. When it was done, fatigued and sweaty with the strain, they trooped over to the tavern for tea, taking the boss in tow as their guest.

The job I was given was to keep an eye on these sub-contractors, to see that they didn't make away with any lumber, bricks, or nails. In addition to his work for the boss, each had contracted for other construction jobs, where they could use

this building material; and they managed to move it off right under my nose.

I received a warm welcome from them, Shishlin remarking, "Remember, you wanted me to take you into my gang? And, now look at you, you're my overseer." And Osip kidded me, "Keep your eye on the water and trust in God." But Peter said sourly, "So, to catch the old mice they send this young crane."

I found my task a torture. I felt embarrassed before these people, whose special knowledges seemed to set them apart, yet whom I had to watch as if they were robbers and swindlers. I took it so hard at first that the observant Osip led me aside and said, "Be sensible, now, you won't get anywhere taking it so hard, understand?"

I didn't, of course, but realizing that he was aware of the absurdity of my position, we had a candid talk. "Get this, now, the man to watch is Peter, the bricklayer. He has a large family to provide for; and he's grasping by nature, besides. Anything he can lay his hands on, no matter how small, a pound of nails, a dozen bricks, a bag of cement, everything's good pickings to him. There he is, an upright, God-fearing man, with a strict code, yet he has this weakness for other people's goods! As for Yefim, he's like a woman, passive and harmless; you don't have to concern yourself about him, though, like other hunchbacks, he's no fool. Then you have Gregory Shishlin, whose peculiarity is that he neither takes nor gives. He gets practically nothing for his work; he's constantly being cheated, and he never cheats to make it up. He doesn't behave rationally."

"Then, he's a moral man?"

Osip stared at me as if from a distance, and made his comment, which has fastened itself in my mind, "He's a moral man, that's true. Being moral comes easy to the lazy. Morality requires no brains."

"And you?" I asked.

Osip laughingly replied, "Me? I'll answer like a young girl. Wait till I'm a grandmother, then I'll tell you everything. And, meanwhile, use your brains and hunt out the real me; it's up to you to find it."

And so all my notions about them collapsed. I could not

question Osip's judgments, since Yefim, Peter and Gregory, themselves, referred to the stately old man as keener and more worldly wise than they. They came to him for advice and showed him every mark of respect. "Be so good as to advise us," they would begin, and were all attention.

Yet, afterwards, Peter would hiss to Gregory, "The heretic!" and with a laugh, Gregory would add, "The clown!"

Gregory's friendly warning to me was, "Watch yourself when you're with the old man, Alex. Before you know it, he'll have you twisted around his finger. The old man is gone sour. God keep you from harm from him."

"What harm?"

The handsome plasterer blinked. "I don't know how to tell you!"

I was now mystified about all of them. To all appearances, Peter, the bricklayer, was the most pious and upright of the lot. His remarks were brief and pithy, and his mind dwelt on God, death and the hereafter. "Ekh, children, brethren, don't be so rash! How can you ignore what's ahead of you? There's no detour past the cemetery."

He suffered from stomach trouble. On some days he could not eat at all, a morsel of bread causing him such agony as to bring on convulsions.

The humpbacked slater, Yefim, had also seemed thoroughly honest, though eccentric. There were times when his amiability seemed to border on imbecility. He was forever falling in love and he used the same expressions about each woman, "I tell you right out, she's not just a woman, she's peaches and cream. Oh, boy!"

When the vivacious Kunavin Street washerwomen came to the Fair grounds to do odd jobs, Yefim left the roof, watched them from a corner, his bright, gray eyes winking, his mouth stretched wide in a grin, intoning, "What a butterfly the Lord has favored me with; what bliss is my portion! Look at her—peaches and cream! I should offer thanksgivings for this gift of chance. Beauty like this revives me, inflames me!"

In the beginning, the women laughed at him. "Lordy, listen to that hunchback raving!"

But, ignoring their laughter, the slater raved on. A rapt ex-

pression covered his face, with its prominent cheekbones; and his flow of honeyed speech had an intoxication that finally worked on the women. An older one remarked to her companion, "Listen to that man carrying on; but he's not a bad young fellow!"

"It's like a bird singing!"

"You mean a beggar croaking on the church steps," said an obstinate one.

But Yefim was far from a beggar. He had a solid stance, like a well-rooted tree. His voice had a challenging ring; his words were spellbinding, and they lulled the women to silence. Indeed, his whole being seemed to stream toward them in soft, hypnotic speech.

And, in the end, shaking his big, pointed head as though the incident amazed him, as well, he reported to his fellow workmen over the supper table or on the Sabbath, "What a honey, what a darling, that little woman was! I haven't met up with her like, before!"

In these recitals of his conquests, Yefim did not brag about his powers, or gloat over the woman as his victim, as other men did. What he expressed, above all, with his wide, astonished eyes, was joy and gratitude.

Osip, with a reproachful shake of his head, exclaimed, "You're incorrigible. How old are you?"

"Forty-four, but what's that? I threw off five years today; it's as if I bathed in rejuvenating waters. My heart's at rest, and I feel good all over. That's the effect some women have, eh?"

Sour Peter lectured him, "You're heading toward your fifties. Take care or your dissolute ways will have a bitter ending."

And Gregory sighed, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" And I could see that that good-looking man was envious of the hunchback.

Old Osip looked about him from under his straight, silvered eyebrows, and jibed, "Every Mashka has her quirks. One covets cups and spoons, another pins and earrings; yet every Mashka turns into a grandma."

Gregory had a wife, but she lived on a farm. He, too, had his eyes on the approachable washerwomen, who had no

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qualms about "earning something" to supplement their income. They regarded that, in their poverty-stricken circumstances, as no different a means to a livelihood from other work. But the handsome plasterer contented himself with looking. His gaze was oddly pitying, as if sorry for them, or for himself. When they flirted with him, he would give a bashful laugh, and walk off. "Ah, you—"

"What's there stopping you, you goof?" Yefim would ask, astounded.

"I have a wife," Gregory reminded him.

"So what? She doesn't have to know a thing about it!"

"She'd know it if I was unfaithful. She wouldn't miss it, brother."

"How could she?"

"I couldn't tell you how, but she's bound to know so long as she keeps chaste, and as long as I keep chaste, I'd know if she was unfaithful."

"But how?" persisted Yefim, and Gregory reiterated quietly, "I couldn't tell you."

The slater waved his hands, "So! Chaste and knows what? You're a sap!"

Shishlin's gang of seven bricklayers did not defer to him as their boss, but regarded him as one of themselves and, among themselves, referred to him as their "calf." When he saw them dawdling, he would pitch in himself, and with an artistic bit of work as an example, would coax them, "Come on now, boys —get to work!"

Once, delivering a wrathful message to him from my boss, I remarked, "What slow workers they are!"

"Why?" he asked, apparently surprised.

"They should have been through with what they're on now, yesterday; but it won't be done today, either."

"That's so," he agreed, "They won't make it, today." He was silent for a while, then added, "I know I ought to fire them, but you see, they're my own, they come from my village. And, besides, it's God's punishment on man to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow; but the punishment must be borne by all, by you and me, as well. But you and I don't have it as hard —the fact is, I can't fire them!"

He went around like a man in a dream. At times he would walk through the deserted Fair ground streets and, lingering at the railing of one of the canal bridges, would stare down into the water, or up into the clouds, or off into the distance, beyond the Oka. And if one came up to him and inquired, "What are you doing here?" he would reply, "What?" and coming to himself, would return an embarrassed smile. "Just looking around."

Often he would say, "God's put things together very properly, brother—sky, earth, the rivers, the steamers. You can board one and off you go, wherever you want—Ryazan, Rybinsk, Perm, Astrakhan. I took a trip to Ryazan, not a bad little spot, but dead, not like our wonderful, gay Nizhny. And Astrakhan's deader still. It's filled with Kalmucks for whom I've got no use. I don't care for any of those outlandish peoples—Mordvins, Kalmucks. Persians, Germans."

His speech was slow, as if probing for a responsive feeling in others, and always finding it in the bricklayer, Peter.

"They're not settled people, they're nomads," said Peter, sternly, as if imposing a sentence. "They were here before Christ came, but they'll be gone before His second advent."

His face alight, Gregory's voice gained animation. "That's so, isn't it? A people that can look you straight in the face, an honest people like the Russians, that's what I like. I can't stand the Jews, either; and it beats me how they came to be God's people. But I suppose there was wisdom in that."

Portentously the slater added, "Wisdom in it—but much that's superfluous, too."

"Much that's superfluous, indeed," Osip interjected, acidly, "and that fits your talk, you gabbler. You could all use a flogging!"

Osip stood apart and it was impossible to anticipate what his comments would express, agreement or dissent. Though he might go along with them, at times, in their notions, it was clear that he thought them dullards, if not halfwits; and he would growl at them, "Ekh, you sow's litter!" At which they grinned, involuntarily and sourly, but grin they did.

My boss' daily food allotment of five kopecks was not enough to fill me, and I went around hungry. Observing this,

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the men had me join them at their meals; and sometimes they would have me along when they went to the taverns for tea. I readily accepted their invitations. I enjoyed sitting with them, hearing their rambling talk, their anecdotes; and I made a return which they seemed to enjoy—readings from church books.

"You're stuffed with these books of yours; your crop's swollen with them," Osip remarked, studying me with eyes blue as cornflowers. It was not easy to read their expression; the pupils seemed to dissolve and to be afloat. "Better do your reading, bit by bit. You can become a monk when you grow up and be a help to people with your teaching, and end up a millionaire."

"A missionary," Peter, the bricklayer, corrected, in a voice that had a curious overtone of indignation.

"What?" asked Osip.

"You mean missionary! You're not deaf, are you?"

"Well, then, a missionary, and confute the heretics. But those who are reckoned heretics have a right to their bread. A discreet person can get along even with heretics."

Gregory uttered an embarrassed laugh and Peter snorted into his beard, "And those who practice spells get along well enough, and all sorts of godless ones."

Osip retorted, "One who practices spells is an uneducated man; education is not a customary part of their equipment."

And to me he said, "Consider this; listen. A peasant named Tushek lived in our neighborhood, a skinny little tramp, going wherever chance blew him, like a feather—neither a worker, nor altogether an idler. Finally he took to prayer, having nothing else to do; and wandered off, praying, and turned up two years later, his hair down to his shoulders, a skull cap over his head, and a brown leather cassock over his shoulders, and gave us all the condemning eye and howled at us, 'Repent, ye doomed ones!' And why not have fun repenting, particularly if you're a woman? And, as the repenting went on, Tushek ate and drank his fill and over, and had his pick of the women—"

Wrathfully, the bricklayer cut him short, "What's his overeating and drinking got to do with it?"

"What else?"

"It's what he had to say that counts."

"His words? I didn't bother with them. I have enough of my own."

"We've heard all we want about your Tushek!" roared Peter, while Gregory, silent, his head lowered, stared into his glass.

"No argument there," said Osip placatingly, "All I wanted to do was to show our Alex the different roads to the morn-
sel—"

"Some take you straight to jail!"

"Sometimes," Osip agreed. "But priests you run into on all the roads; the point is to know where to make a turn."

He enjoyed ribbing the pious plasterer and bricklayer. He may have disliked them, but if so, he managed to hide it. You could not pin down any positive attitude in him. He showed Yefim more indulgence, more good will, than the rest. The slater stayed out of their discussions about God, the eternal verities, the miseries of mankind, religious dogmas, etc. In a chair placed sideways, so that he could sit at the table without the chairback jolting his hump, he would silently sip his tea until, suddenly on the alert, he would peer through the smoke and hold his ear cocked for a certain voice he had picked out of the din, and then he was up and out in a flash. That meant that someone he owed money to had come in—Yefim's creditors were many. Since some had taken to beating him on sight, he fled to keep them from that temptation.

"The cranks get furious!" was his surprised comment. "Don't they realize I'd pay them the money if I had it?"

"Oh, the bitterness of poverty!" Osip would call after him.

There were times when Yefim, lost in reveries, would seem insensible to sight or sound. A soft look that made his amiable eyes glow more amiably still, suffused his face.

"A penny for your thoughts!" he would be offered.

"I was thinking how I'd marry a lady, a noblewoman, by God! If I was rich, maybe a colonel's daughter. God, how I'd love her! Because, brothers, once there was a colonel whose house I was roofing—"

"Yes, and we've heard all about his widowed daughter," Peter interrupted irritably.

But Yefim, putting his hands on his knees, and rocking him-

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self till his hump seemed to be hammering the air, went on, "She'd come into the garden, sometimes, all in white, gorgeous she was. I looked at her from the roof, and felt sunstruck. Where did that white ray come from, like a white dove flying up from the ground! Peaches and cream she was! With a lady like that you'd not want any days, only nights!"

"And what would you do for meals?" taunted Peter.

But Yefim, undisturbed, said, "We wouldn't need much. And then, she's so rich!"

"And when are you starting this high life, you rascal?" laughed Osip.

Yefim never talked of anything but women, and was an un-dependable worker. After a stretch of good work, he would go lax, his mallet tapping at random and leaving gaps. He had a tarry smell, but a wholesome, pleasant smell as well, like that of fresh-cut lumber.

With Osip, the carpenter, you could discuss anything you were interested in. His words always reached inward, though you couldn't tell his banter from his serious talk.

Gregory's favorite topic was God, of Whom he spoke with serious confidence.

"Some people don't believe in God, did you know that?" I asked him.

"What do you mean?" he replied, with a gentle laugh.

"They deny the existence of God."

"Oh, you mean that! I know." And, as if he were fanning off invisible insects, he went on, "Remember what King David said long ago, 'The fool hath said in his heart, "There is no God.'" That's how David put it. Without God, where would we be?"

As if in corroboration, Osip said, "Just try to take God away from our Peter. He'd give it to you!"

Gregory's good-looking face set into a solemn look. With fingers whose nails were crusted with lime, he stroked his beard, and said loftily, "There's God in every animate thing; conscience, our whole spiritual life, derives from God."

"What about sin?"

"Sin is from the carnal part, from Satan! It's external, a sort of smallpox, that's all. The more one thinks of sin, the more

sinner one is! If you don't dwell on sin, you don't sin. It's Satan, the tempter, ruler of the flesh, from whom come sinful thoughts."

This, Peter the bricklayer disputed. "That's where you're wrong."

"Certainly not! God's without sin, and man's both His image and His resemblance. The image, which is the flesh, sins; but his resemblance is spirit and is beyond sin." And his face took on a triumphant smile.

Still Peter muttered, "You're wrong!"

"I suppose your view," Osip cut in, "is that without sin there can be no repentance and without repentance, no salvation?"

"That way there's hope. As our Father said, "Fear of the devil maintains the love of God."

Gregory was no drinker; two glasses, and he was off. His cheeks would flush, his eyes take on an infantile expression, and he would sing out, "Brothers, how well we live; we do a bit of work, we eat our fill; praise God! How good it all is!" And tears would trickle down and stud his silky beard like paste pearls.

I found his lachrymose praise of our life unseemly. Grandma's praises of life had been more human, warmer, and more convincing.

These arguments, which aroused emotions in me too vague to define, kept me in a perturbed state. By that time I had read much that had been written about peasants; and saw no resemblance between those in the books and those to be encountered in the real world. In the books their talk was less of God, of sectarian dogma, of churches, than of government, law and the land; in the books their talk was less about women and, then, though coarse, was less hostile. In the real world women were the peasants' pastime—albeit a risky one. A man had to be clever to get the best of a woman; and if he failed, his life was a failure. The book *muzhik*⁸⁷ might be good or bad, but too entirely one or the other. The real *muzhik* is neither wholly good nor bad, but a remarkably interesting character. Among peasants, if a man doesn't blurt out everything, you have the

⁸⁷ A common term for peasant, sometimes derogatory.

impression that he is holding something back, reserved for himself alone; and the concealed and unexpressed thing is the key to him.

Of all the book peasants, I preferred Peter in the book, *The Carpenters' Society*. I brought the book to the Fair grounds to read to the men, on one of the many nights I slept over in one of the workshops, because I was too exhausted to plod home. On hearing I had a book about carpenters, they showed keen interest, Osip in particular. Taking the book from me, he leafed through it dubiously, with questioning shakes of his head. "It's really about us? You rascal! Who's the writer? A gentleman? That's what I guessed! Gentlemen and *chinovniks*, they're your universal authorities. Where God won't risk a guess, a *chinovnik's* mind is all made up. That's their whole life!"

"Bringing God in that way smacks of blasphemy," warned Peter.

"Never mind; what are my words to God? Less than a snowflake or a raindrop to me. Don't fret; you and I don't trouble God."

And from him came a sudden spurt of talk, bright little sayings, sharp as sparks from a flint, with which he snipped, as if they were scissors, whatever was not to his liking. And, several times a day, he asked me, "Will we have a reading, Alex? That's the idea!"

After supper, which I had in Osip's shop, Peter came in with his helper, Ardalon, and Gregory with a boy named Tom. In the shed, where the workers' bunks were, there was a lamp, and I did my reading in its light. They did not interrupt, but they were restless; and at last Ardalon protested, "I've had enough of it!" and went out. Gregory was the first who napped off, his mouth open as if sleep had taken him by surprise. All the carpenters followed; but Peter, Osip and Tom drew closer to me, with intent expressions. The reading finished, Osip turned out the lamp. By the position of the stars, we knew it was about midnight.

In the dark, Peter asked, "Why was this written? Against whom?"

"Time to sleep," said Osip, pulling off his boots.

"I'm asking, whom was that written against?" Peter insisted.
"That's their concern," said Osip, stretching out on a trestle bed.

"If it's against stepmothers, there's no point to it; it won't reform them," insisted the bricklayer. "And if it's against people, it's just as pointless; his sin's the answer. Siberia for murderers; that's all there is to it. Can books stop such sins, eh?"

Osip kept silent and the bricklayer went on, "They can't do a piece of work themselves, so they gab about the work of others; like women at a meeting. Let's get some sleep; good night."

But he paused in the deep blue rectangle of the open door and asked, "Asleep yet, Osip? What's your opinion?"

"What?" asked the carpenter, drowsily.

"Never mind; go back to sleep."

Gregory had dropped off on his side; Tom was stretched out on trampled straw at my side. Sleep had the whole neighborhood in its grip. From far off came the sounds of a passing train; the blast from the engine, the grinding of wheels on rails, the clank of the couplings. Snoring, in different keys, filled the shed. I felt restless. I was disappointed not to hear the discussion I had expected.

Suddenly Osip's voice came upon me, quietly and evenly, "Son, don't take any of that seriously. You're young; you have a long life ahead of you. Trust to your own thoughts. What you feel for yourself is worth twice what anyone else can tell you. Are you asleep, Tom?"

"No," said Tom, eagerly.

"Good! The two of you've been taught to read. Keep it up. But don't believe everything in print. Anything can be printed, you know. Printing things is a business."

He sat up, and with his hands gripping the edge of the board, bent toward us and went on. "Books?—How should you look at them? A book denounces somebody, that's what a book does. See the sort of man he is, a carpenter, or what have you—and contrast him with what gentleman—quite another sort, eh? A book's written with some purpose and about somebody."

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In a choked voice Tom said, "Peter had a right to kill that contractor!"

"No. Nobody has a right to take a human life. I know you hate Gregory, but get that idea out of your head. There are no magnates here. Today I'm a boss, tomorrow back at my bench."

"I wasn't thinking of you, Uncle Osip."

"It's all one."

"You're fair—"

"Hold it. Let me show you why they write books," Osip caught up the overwrought Tom. "They had a clever idea, there. On the one hand, you have a gentleman without a *muzhik*, and the other a *muzhik* without a gentleman. Watch them. Both are in trouble. The gentleman loses his strength and goes out of his mind; the *muzhik* struts and takes to drink and gets sick and nasty. That's how it goes. It went better in the lord's castle; the *muzhik* was protected by his master, and the master by the *muzhik*; and so it went between them, and they all ate well and lived in peace. Certainly it was more peaceful living under the nobility. A *muzhik* who was too poor was no good to the master; it was to his advantage if the *muzhik* was intelligent and well off; it was as if he was armed with a good weapon. I know; some forty years, you see, I lived on a nobleman's estate. A lot of experience is scored over my hide!"

I recalled similar views of the nobility from the carter who had cut his throat; and it troubled me that Osip should think along the same lines as that crooked-minded old man.

Osip put his hand on my knee and went on, "So you must know how to interpret books and writings of whatever sort. Nothing's done without a reason. They don't write books for nothing, or just to puzzle people. Every being in creation is given the power to think; and without it you couldn't lift an axe or cobble a shoe." After going on so for a long time, he lay down. But, soon, he was up again, his individual and neatly-turned phrases playing deftly through the still darkness.

"It's said the nobility is a different breed than the peasantry, but that's not so. We're the same stock as the nobility; only by chance, we're born on the lower rungs. Certainly, a nobleman

has the advantage of books, while I have to learn with my own skull; and his skin hasn't got my callouses; that's all the difference. Well, boys, it's time for a new way of life; they ought to scrap all those writings! Everyone should ask himself, 'What am I?' 'A man!' 'And what's he?' 'A man, too!' Then what? Does a rich man's superfluity count with God? No. In the sight of God, our endowments are equal!"

And by the time dawn had extinguished the stars, Osip told me, "See, now, what writing I could do? I've talked of things I've never thought of till now. But don't take me too seriously. I was talking because I couldn't sleep, not because I meant anything by it. Lie down and think of something entertaining. Once there was a crow, and it flew across the fields and over the hills and from frontier to frontier and lived past its time; and the Lord finished it. The crow is dead and dusty. What's the meaning? There's no meaning whatsoever. Just get some sleep; soon it will be time to go to work."

Chapter Eighteen

AS IN THE CASE OF JAKE THE STOKER, OSIP GREW UPON ME, till he blotted all others from my eyes. He somehow resembled the stoker, but there were touches in him, as well, of grandpa, of the old appraiser, and of the chef, Smoury. Among the people engraved in my memory, he has cut the deepest, bitten in as an oxide into a brass bell. What set him apart was his two-sided mind. By day, at work and among people, his brisk, clear ideas were practical and far easier to comprehend than those he expressed in the evening among his cronies, or talking to fill a sleepless night. His night thoughts changed their shape like a lamp flame. They burned so brightly; but what was their actual form? And in which form did the idea reflect the real, inward Osip?

He seemed to me quite the cleverest man I had ever met, and I was always at his heels, as I had been with the stoker, studying him, trying to understand him. But he slipped out of my grasp; there was no way to hold him. If there was anything real in him, where was it hidden? What dare believe? And I recalled his remark, "The real me? It's up to you to find it!"

My self-esteem was challenged; in fact, it had become almost a life-and-death matter for me to track down that elusive old man who, nevertheless, was so formidably solid. It seemed to me he could live another hundred years without change, so invulnerably did he preserve his individuality in the flux of unstable people around him. The appraiser had given me a similar expression of stability, but it had not had the same attraction for me. Osip's was of a different sort, and in a way I can't define, more attractive.

Human inconsistency impinges only too forcefully on one's notice; I was bewildered by the acrobatic hopping of people

from one perch to another. I had long wearied of the surprises in these incomprehensible somersaults, which had exhausted my interest in people and lessened my love for them.

Thus, one early June day, a rickety cab pulled up at our work site. The bearded, hatless cabman was drunk; his lip was cut, and he sat hiccoughing on the driver's seat; and inside was Gregory Shishlin, drunk and rolling on the arm of a plump, red-cheeked girl. She was equipped with a straw bonnet trimmed with glass cherries and a red band, a parasol in her fist, and rubbers on bare feet. Flirting her parasol, and swaying her hips, she said, in a blend of screams and giggles, "What the hell! The Fair's not open; there isn't any Fair; and that's how he takes me to the Fair! Holy Mother——"

Gregory, tattered and crestfallen, tottered out of the cab and collapsed on the ground, where he proclaimed to all the spectators, tearfully, "Down on my knees I go! I have sinned! I had sinful thoughts and I sinned! Yefim says 'Come on, Gregory!' And he's right, too; so you people will forgive me; let's all have something; it's on me. He's right; we live only once; and that's the long and the short of it."

The girl shrieked with laughter and swung her legs in the cab, kicking off her rubbers; the cabman growled, "Let's get on; the horse wants to be off!"

The horse, an aged, worn animal, lathered with foam, stood as if he had landed in his grave. There was something wildly ludicrous in the scene. Gregory's workmen were doubled up with laughter, as they watched their boss, his lady, and the besotted cabman. Tom alone was not laughing. He stood beside me, in the shop door, muttering, "The swine! Devil take him! And his wife's a real beauty!"

The cabman kept calling on them to get going. The girl got out, pulled Gregory to his feet, and, directing the driver with her parasol, cried, "Drive on!"

With good-natured laughter and looks of disguised envy at the boss, the men went back to work at Tom's order. The latter, it was obvious, hated to see Gregory an object of ridicule. "Call that a business man!" he grumbled. "I've got just about a month to finish up here. Then I'll go back to the village. This is more than I can take."

I felt upset for Gregory's sake; that cherry-festooned girl had looked so cheap beside him.

It puzzled me how Gregory had come to be boss, and Tom Tuchkov his workman. A powerfully-built youth with curly hair, an eagle-like nose, and shrewd, gray eyes lighting up his round face, Tom did not have a peasant look. In good clothes he would be taken for a merchant's son, a man of good family. He was sober, sparing of words, and practical. Having received an education, he kept Gregory's books and drew up estimates; and, though a reluctant worker himself, knew how to keep his workmates on the job. "You can't stretch the work out to eternity," he remarked coolly.

He despised books. "Let them print anything they care to," he said, "but I'm doing my own thinking. Books are all bunk."

He was interested in everything, and when something took his attention, would pursue it, adding detail upon detail, but giving it the color of his own thoughts, assessing it by his own standards.

When I told him he ought to be a contractor on his own, his answer was, "Yes, if it meant a business in thousands. But to fret myself over kopecks, that's not worth my while. I'm keeping my eyes open; then I'll join a monastery in Oranko. I've got looks and a strong build; I may catch the eye of a rich widow. Things like that happen. I knew a chap from Sergatsk who struck it rich in a couple of years, got himself a city wife, from these parts, too. Delivered an icon to her house and caught her eye."

The idea obsessed him. He was full of stories of how work in a monastery had been the foundation of an easy life. Such stories and this drift of Tom's mind repelled me; but I took his going to a monastery for granted. And so, when the Fair opened and Tom took a job as a waiter in a tavern, he surprised everybody. Perhaps it was no surprise to his workmates, but they all scoffed at him. On holidays they would troop out for tea, saying, "Let's have a look at our Tommy." And, when they arrived, they would bawl out, "Hi, there, you with the curls, some service here!"

He'd come up, his nose up in the air. "What can I do for you?"

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"Don't you remember faces?"

"I never remember faces."

He was aware of the scorn of his mates, their ridicule, and his look was defensive. His face might have been carved out of wood, but its expression said, "Get it over with. Laugh, and have it over with."

"Shall we tip him?" they would say, and after deliberately fussing with their wallets, they would leave him nothing.

I asked Tom how come he had taken the waiter's job instead of a job in the monastery. "I never meant it about the monastery, and I won't be a waiter for long."

He was a waiter still when I ran across him, four years afterward, in Tsarytsyn,³⁸ and some time later, I saw an item in the paper about the arrest of Thomas Tuchkov, on a burglary charge.

I was also moved and mystified by what became of the bricklayer, Ardalon, Peter's oldest and best workman. This man, too, black-bearded and cheerful, made one wonder, Why is Peter the boss and not he? He rarely touched vodka and then usually in moderation. He knew his work well and seemed to love it, the bricks soaring in his hands like red birds. Alongside him the skinny, sickly Peter seemed valueless to the gang. Peter said of their work, "For others I build houses of stone; for myself I build a wooden coffin."

In contrast, Ardalon, jovial at his bricklaying, told me, "Work is for God's glory, my boy!" Next spring, he said, would see him in Tomsk, in Siberia, as overseer in the construction of a church his brother-in-law had the contract for. "I've got my mind set on that. I love building churches!" And he urged me to join him. "Siberia's made for a man with an education; that's where it's a big advantage!"

I agreed, and delighted as if over a personal triumph, he crowed, "It's a deal. I'm not joking!"

Toward Peter and Gregory, his attitude was jestingly good-natured, as toward a pair of children. To Osip he said of them, "Showoffs—always making big claims to each other, like card players, 'I hold the ace,' 'And I'm trumping it!'"

³⁸ Now Stalingrad.

Osip immediately rejoined, "That's how it's bound to be. It's natural to show off. Don't girls walk with their tits out?"

"That's right. God's always on their tongue, but their money these guys keep to themselves," said Ardalon.

"Can't say that about Gregory, though."

"Aah—I'm talking about myself. I want to be with God in the deep forests in the wilderness. I'm tired of it here. In the spring it'll be Siberia for me."

Ardalon's workmates said enviously, "Give us a break like that, such a brother-in-law, and we'd risk Siberia, too."

Suddenly Ardalon dropped out of sight. After leaving his workshop on Sunday, three days went by without a sign of him. "He might have been murdered," "He might have drowned," were among our worried guesses. But Yefim came to announce sheepishly, "He's on a bat."

"What do you want to lie for?" exclaimed Peter.

"He's drinking; he's hitting it hard. He's going like a kiln on fire in the center. Maybe the wife he loved so much just died."

"Go on; he's a widower. Where is he?" And Peter started out to Ardalon's rescue only to be fought off.

Then Osip, with a determined set to his lips, and his hands in his pockets, said, "How about my taking a look into it? A guy like that's worth the trouble."

I went along. On the way Osip said to me, "Here's a chap, quiet, well-behaved, no peep out of him for years; then, suddenly he cuts loose and he's all over the place. Watch, Alex, and learn."

Our destination was one of the Kunavin village dives, where we were met by a predatory old madam. After a whispered confab with Osip, she brought us to a small, bare room, as dim and reeking as a stable. There on a cot, lay a hulking woman who, even in sleep, thrust herself into suggestive postures. The old madam prodded her with her fist, bawling, "Up, frog, get up!"

"Heavens! Who's there? What's up?"

"Detectives!" shouted Osip. The woman moaned, and scuttled out. Osip spat after her and enlightened me: "Detectives scare them worse than the devil."

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The old madam removed a small mirror from the wall, and folded away a loose strip of wallpaper and asked, "Take a look. Is that your man?"

Osip looked through what turned out to be a crack in the wall, and replied, "That's the man. Get the woman out!"

I, too, took a look and, through the crack, beheld a companion stable stall to ours. Beside a window with drawn shutters, on whose sill burned a tin lamp, was a naked, cross-eyed Tatar woman mending a chemise. The bed was behind her and on its pillows we could make out Ardalon's puffy face and black, matted, outthrust beard.

With a shudder the woman slipped on the chemise, walked past the bed and, suddenly, was in our room.

Osip glared at her, spat, and muttered, "Pugh, you tart!"

With a laugh she retorted, "Pugh on you, old dodo!" Laughing, Osip wagged his finger at her.

We made our way into the Tatar woman's stall. It took some time for old Osip, sitting at the foot of the bed, to rouse Ardalon out of his stupor. "Hold on," he mumbled, "wait a while. We'll be along."

Finally he came to, gave a wild look at us, shut his blood-shot eyes again, and mumbled, "Well, now."

"What's come over you?" asked Osip, more in pity than reproach.

"I was pushed into it!" said Ardalon, with a grating cough.
"How so?"

"I had a reason."

"You were dissatisfied, I suppose."

"What's the use!" And Ardalon picked an uncorked vodka bottle off the table and took a swallow, inviting Osip, "How about a nip? We ought to be able to rustle up a bite to eat, too."

Old Osip took a gulp, frowning as the liquor went down, and chewed thoughtfully at a bite of bread, while Ardalon mumbled fogily, "So I've come to this, holing up with a she-Tatar. Pure Tatar, according to Yefim, a young one, an orphan from Kasimov, getting all set for the Fair."

From the other side of the wall, the woman called out in halting Rusian, "The prize ones are the Tatars, you know;

game like young hens. Tell him to beat it. He's not your father!"

"That's her," said Ardalon, gawking at the wall.

"I've had a look at her," said Osip.

To me Ardalon said, "Well, brother. So you see the sort I am!"

I awaited a storm of reproaches, a biting homily from Osip, that would drive Ardalon to cringing repentance. Nothing of the sort. The two sat side by side, their shoulders touching, and spoke in quiet monosyllables. They were a melancholy pair in that dingy stall. The woman kept up a ridiculous tirade through the wall, but was ignored. Osip took a walnut from the table, cracked it under his heel, neatly picked out the kernel, and disposed of the shell, and asked, "Money all gone?"

"No. Peter has some of it."

"So. Aren't you going away? If you went to Tomsk——"

"What for?"

"So, you've had a change of mind?"

"If it was with strangers it would be another matter."

"What are you talking about?"

"But it's with my sister and my brother-in-law."

"So what?"

"It's no holiday, making a new beginning among your own folks."

"It's no holiday anywhere."

"Just the same——"

And their talk, though serious, was so amiable that the Tatar woman stopped railing at them, came in to get her dress, and left them.

"A young one," remarked Osip.

Ardalon looked at him and continued affably, "Yefim's a nitwit. He has nothing on his mind except women. But the Tatar woman's a joy; she sets you on fire."

"Watch out, or you won't get away from her," warned Osip, and having masticated the walnut, he made his farewell.

On the way back I asked Osip, "Why did you go there?"

"Just to have a look. I've known him for years, and he's not the first case I've seen of your good citizen suddenly carrying on like an escaped convict." And Osip repeated a former warn-

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ing, "Steer clear of the vodka," adding, a moment later, "though life without it would be a bore."

"Without vodka?"

"Yes. You drink, and it's like slipping into another world."

There was no real coming back for Ardalon. He was back at work several days later, but only for a couple of days. In the spring, I ran across him among the casual dock laborers. He was one of a gang that was breaking up the ice around the moored barges. We exchanged friendly greetings and had tea together in a tavern where he boasted, "Remember what a hand I was—A, number one! I could have made my pile."

"But you didn't."

"No, I didn't," he agreed jauntily. "Work? I spit on it!" The people, listening in around us, were impressed by his swagger.

"Remember what that crook, Peter, says about work? Stone mansions for others and a coffin for himself; that's what work is!"

I said, "Peter's a sick man and he's got death on his mind."

"I'm a sick man, too; my heart's out of whack."

On holidays I sauntered out to the waterside, to "Million" Street, where the longshoremen hung out, and was amazed at how quickly Ardalon had adapted himself to that rough crew. A year before he had been a serene, sober man; now he was one of the most boisterous of them, had acquired their odd, shambling gait, their pugnacious look, as if daring everybody to a fight, and bragged, "See how I have it here! I'm a leader here!"

He was free with his money, standing treat whenever he had it. In fights he was always on the side of the under-dog; and you'd often hear his cry, "That's not fair, boys; keep it fair!" And this won him the nickname, "Fair-play," which thrilled him.

To these people, crammed into that noisome sack of a street, I gave impassioned study. All had broken away from conventional ways, and had improvised jollier ways of their own, without grace of bosses. Bold and carefree, they brought to mind grandpa's bargemen pals who had so readily turned hermit or bandit. When work was slack, they did not hesitate to lift something from barge or steamer holds, which gave me

no shock, since, so far as I could see, life was held together by the thread of robbery, like a worn coat stitched together with gray thread. I observed, however, that they were lackadaisical workers except in emergencies, such as fires or the break of the river-ice, when they threw in all their energies. On the whole their life had a more festive character than that of other people.

Osip, observing how I had gravitated to Ardalon, gave the fatherly counsel. "Take care, son; why find your pals in 'Million' Street? See that you don't get hurt!"

I did my best to explain my attraction toward these people, who led such a lively, workfree existence.

"Birds of the air!" he broke in, laughing. "Idle, useless people, who look on work as a calamity!"

"But, after all, what is work? As they put it, 'Honest labor provides no stone mansions'" Out came this facile saying which I had heard so often, and seemed so true to me.

It only incensed Osip, who stormed at me, "Where did you hear that? From fools and wastrels! A snipper your age shouldn't swallow such things. You—! It's the failures who spew out such envious drivel. Hold off flying, son, until your feathers grow in. I'm going to let your boss know about your new pals."

He did and the boss added his warnings. "Keep away from 'Million' Street. It's a hangout for crooks and whores; and it's next door to the jail and the hospital. Keep away, I tell you!"

From then on, my visits to "Million" Street were surreptitious; and they soon came to an end. I was with Ardalon and Robenok, a pal of his, one day, on the roof of a shed in a boarding house yard. Robenok, whose soldiering had included service both as cavalryman and sapper, was giving a humorous account of a hoboing trip from Rostov-on-Don to Moscow. A wound in the knee, received during the Turkish War, had left him lame. Thus, the power in his unusually powerful arms was no help in getting him jobs. As the result of some other affliction he had become hairless, and his head was like that of a new-born babe.

His brown eyes flashed as he narrated, "And at Serpukhov I ran across a priest in a sleigh, and I said, 'Alms, Father, for a Turkish hero.'"

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"That's a lie," said Ardalon, shaking his head.

"Why should I lie?" asked Robenok, not put out at all.

In indolent reproach my friend muttered, "You're incorrigible. You could get a job as a watchman; any cripple can get a job like that; but you'd rather mooch and lie."

"All I do it for is to amuse people; I lie to make them laugh."

We were having dry, sunny weather, but it was dark and damp here in the yard. Suddenly a woman came in, waving a rag before her, and crying, "Friends, who wants to buy a petticoat?"

Women crawled out of their holes, and surrounded the seller, whom I had immediately recognized as the laundress, Natalie. She made her sale to the first bidder, and by the time I got down from the roof, was gone. But I caught up with her at the gate and greeted her rapturously, "How are you?"

"What nerve!" was her return greeting, as she gave me an irritated glance. Then, recognizing me, she stood stock still and exclaimed, "God save us! What brings you here?"

Her reaction disturbed me; she was clearly upset on my account. Astonishment and dismay were only too clear on her wise face. I explained that I did not live here, that I came here here only as an onlooker.

"An onlooker!" she burst out, in angry mockery. "What sort of place is this for sight-seeing? You're after the women!"

Her face had grown withered; there were rings under her eyes; and her lips had a feeble droop. At a tavern door she said, "Come in for a glass of tea. I don't believe you, though you dress differently from the people hereabouts."

In the tavern, however, her doubts began to disappear. As she poured the tea, she told me that she had got up only a little while ago and had not yet breakfasted. "And last night I got to bed dead drunk, and where I had been drinking and with whom, I couldn't tell you."

I couldn't help feeling awkward with her and full of sorrow. My chief concern was to find out about her daughter. After she had had some vodka and hot tea, her talk took on the coarse, lively familiarity of the women of this street; but my question about her daughter immediately sobered her.

"What are you so curious for? No, my lad; you won't get your hands on her. Get that out of your mind." And after she had had some more drink, she said, "My daughter and I have nothing to do with each other. Who am I? A washerwoman; what kind of mother is that for an educated girl? And that's just what she is, brother! She's gone off to be a teacher, and she lives with a rich friend, just like—" A pause, and then she concluded, "And that's how it goes. You don't care for the washerwoman, but the street walker—?"

It was obvious she had become a street walker; no other sort frequented that alley. But to have her admit it brought tears of shame and pity to my eyes. I felt seared, as by a flame, by that admission from one once so courageous, bright and free.

With a sigh, after giving me a long look, she said, "Now, you get out of this place, I beg you. Please stay away from here, or you'll go under!" And in a gentle, broken voice, as if to herself, her head bowed and her fingers scrabbling on the tray, she said, "But how can I expect you to listen, no matter how I advise you and beg you. My own daughter wouldn't hear me. I cried to her, 'You can't throw your own mother off! How can you think of that?' 'I'll choke myself!' said she. That's what she said. And she went to Kazan, to study for a midwife, but how about me? What did I have to do? And this is what I've come to; I've gone on the street!"

Then she was silent a long time, though her lips fluttered with the soundless motion of her thoughts. It was clear she had forgotten about me. Her mouth sagged at the corners; it was a torture to see the trembling of her lips and to read the wordless writing of the tw'ching furrows on her face, which seemed to me like that of a heartbroken child. Strands of her hair had escaped from her kerchief and lay over her cheek or around her dainty ear. Observing that her tears were splashing into her cold tea, she pushed it away and shut her eyes, the pressure forcing out more tears. Then she dried her face on her handkerchief. I could stand it no longer and got up and bid her "Good-by."

"What? Oh, go to the devil!" she replied, waving me off without a look, having forgotten, apparently, whom she was with.

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I returned to look for Ardalon, with whom I was to have gone crabbing; and I was eager, too, to talk to him about Natalie. But both he and Robenok had left the shed roof; and while I was hunting him through the slovenly yard, the street began to ring with the sort of brawl common in that quarter.

Coming out of the gate, I bumped into Natalie, who was weeping and dabbing her handkerchief at bruises on her face. She was also trying to fix her hair, as she staggered, almost blindly, down the sidewalk. After her came Ardalon, with Robenok following behind and egging him on: "Come on; let her have another one!"

Overtaking the woman, Ardalon brandished his fist. Turning on them, her bosom heaving, her eyes blazing hatred out of her awful face, Natalie cried out, "Come on, hit me!"

I grabbed Ardalon's arm and he turned an astonished look upon me.

"What's come over you?"

I barely managed to blurt out, "Don't you touch her!"

He burst into laughter. "So, that's your sweetie! Damn that Natalie; she's caught our little saint!"

Robenok joined in the laughter, holding his sides. I stood there, frying in the heat of their obscenities; but while they were at it, Natalie got away. Finding them unbearable, I butted Robenok with my head, knocked him over, and ran from them.

After that I kept away from "Million" Street. However, I came upon Ardalon on the ferry, and he gave me a jovial greeting. "Where've you been keeping yourself?"

When I let him know how offended I had been by his cruelties toward Natalie and his lewd conjectures about me, he dismissed it all with good-natured laughter.

"So you took all that seriously? We were only ribbing you, smearing it on for fun! And as for that tart, what's wrong with giving a street walker a beating? Men beat their wives, so do you expect us to have more consideration for that sort? But the whole business was a joke. And would you have it that the fist isn't a good teacher?"

"Who are you to instruct her? How are you any better?"

He put his hands on my shoulders, gave me a shake, and

said in a jesting tone, "Among the disgraced, who's better than the other?" Then, with a laugh, he boasted, "But, brother, I understand it inside out. I'm on to it all. I'm not a block of wood!"

He had been drinking, but had not yet got beyond the happy stage. His glance at me was that of the indulgent and sympathetic teacher to the uncomprehending disciple.

I sometimes ran into Paul Odnitzov. He was quite the dandy, and, if anything, livelier than before. His manner toward me was rather condescending and even a bit resentful. "Wasting your time in this sort of work! Living with *muzhiks*!"

But when he gave me news of the workshop, he became sad. "Zhikharev's till doting on that cow of his. Sitanov's discontented and he's hitting the bottle. Goloviev's made a meal for the wolves. He was reeling home, dead drunk, from Sviatka, and the wolves made a meal of him." He laughed as he added, "After they ate him, they got tipsy, too. They got up on their hind legs, like trick dogs, and waltzed through the woods. But then they took to quarreling and before the end of the day, they'd finished each other off."

I joined in his laughter; yet, the workshop and my experiences in it seemed very remote from me now, and it made me melancholy to realize it.

Chapter Nineteen

SINCE THERE WAS PRACTICALLY NOTHING TO DO AT THE FAIR grounds in winter, the countless house chores became my occupation. These devoured my day, but my evenings were free. Again I read aloud to the boss' family, the tasteless serial in "Neva" and "The Moscow Gazette"; but at night I divided my time between reading books of my own choice and composing verses.

On a day when the women were at church and my master was confined to the house by illness, he asked me, "Is it true you're writing poetry? Victor's been making cracks about it. So? Well, read me some of it."

I could not refuse, and read him some pieces which apparently did not impress him. However, he was kind enough to say, "Stick at it! You might turn out a Pushkin. Have you read him?" And he quoted the lines, "Do elves hold solemn funerals? Do witches marry in state?" adding, "In his time people still believed in demons and witchcraft, but not he; he was only playing with it. It's a fact, brother, you should have been given an education, but it's too late for that, now. If I were you I'd keep that scrapbook out of sight of the women. If they get their hands on it, they'll ride you. Women, I tell you, brother," he concluded, with a meditative slowing down of his words, "women have a way of stinging at one's sore spots."

Recently the boss had become noticeably preoccupied. He took quick, uneasy looks about him; and every time the doorbell rang, he jumped. He would sometimes flare up over trifles, find fault with everybody, then slam out of the house, to get home late and drunk. You could feel he was hiding something that had come into his life and was cutting him to the heart; and that his daily life was now involuntary, hardly conscious even, that it went on out of habit.

Sundays, after the midday meal and up to nine o'clock was

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my free time, and I used it to roam around, winding up in the early evening at a tavern on Yamsky Street. Its stout, sweaty proprietor was a devotee of music, a fact known to choir singers, and of which they took advantage by congregating at his bar. Their vodka, beer or tea was on the house when they sang for him. I found the singers a dull and sotish sort who sang not for the love of it, but for the free drink—and seldom anything but church music. Since some of the more pious sorts were squeamish about being seen in a tavern, the proprietor had them in a back room; and their performances I had to enjoy, muted, as it came through the door. Often country people and peasant laborers came in to show off their voices. The tavern keeper broadcast his invitations to singers through the town, especially on market days when the peasants flocked in.

The performer was seated at the bar, with the bottom of a vodka keg behind him, making a circular frame for his head. The best of them—and they were all good—was the skinny, squeezed-in little harness-maker, Kleshchov, whose head was crowned with red tufts, whose little nose was shiny like a corpse's, and whose eyes had a serene, dreamy, immobile stare. Shutting his eyes and leaning back till his head touched the vodka keg, and swelling out his chest, he would let go with his soft, yet overwhelming, tenor, singing the staccato "Ah, how the fog descends, to stain the clean fields and blot out the roads." After a pause, and bending farther back till he was resting on the bar, while his face was turned up to the ceiling, he went on, "Ah, where then, where shall I go, where find the broad, high road?"

His was a small voice, suited to his small body, but it was tireless. He filled the dim, bleary depths of the tavern with chords of silver, with sighing words. His plaintive singing captivated everybody. Even the drunks were silenced and sat with their heads bowed. And my heart was flooded with those overwhelming emotions that always well up when good music, in its miraculous way, plumbs the very sources of the soul.

Then a churchlike quiet descended over the tavern and the singer was like a benevolent priest who did not arraign, but simply and with all his heart, prayed for the whole family of mankind, meditating aloud, one might say, on the tribulations

that afflict man. Bearded men turned rapt stares upon him; in hard faces, eyes blinked like those of children; and involuntary sighs testified to the power of music. It seemed to me, then, that it was the ordinary life of people that was insignificant and unreal; that it was here that one came upon reality.

Blowsy Liza, the old clothes dealer, a dissolute, repellent creature who sat in a corner by herself, hung her head down to her fat shoulder and wept, surreptitiously dabbing at tears in her usually shameless eyes. Near her sat the sullen choir singer, Mitropolsky, a hairy young man with round eyes set deep in his sodden face, who looked like an unfrocked deacon. He stared into his vodka glass, lifted it to his lips, then carefully set it down again, but with a clatter. At that moment he couldn't bear to drink.

His song over, Kleshchov made himself comfortable in his chair, and the tavern keeper, handing him a drink, said with a smug smile, "Ah, that was certainly well done, though it's hardly what I'd call singing. I'd call it declamation. But you're a master at it, they can say what they like. Nobody can deny that."

Kleshchov sipped his drink, and with a throat-clearing cough, said in a matter-of-fact way, "Whoever has a voice can sing, but it's my particular gift to project the very soul of the song."

"Why brag about it?"

"He doesn't brag who has nothing to brag about," replied the singer with even calmer self-assurance.

"What conceit, Kleshchov!" exclaimed his annoyed host.

"I don't go beyond what my conscience permits."

From his corner the sullen Mitropolsky growled, "Oh, you dirt and worms, a fallen angel sings, and what do you know about it?"

Mitropolsky was the eternal adversary, arguing with everybody, arraigning everybody, incurring cruel retribution every Sunday from a singer or anybody else who decided to pay him off.

The host could not abide the singer, though he adored the song. He ran him down, and took every opportunity that offered, to direct ridicule upon the singer, a fact that was no secret to the customers, nor to Kleshchov himself. "A good

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singer—that he is,” acknowledged the host, “but vain; he needs to be taken down a peg.” And not a few of the guests nodded agreement. “Yes, he’s too conceited.”

“What’s he so vain about? His voice? He got that from God, not by any act of his own. And it’s lacking in volume, isn’t it?” his host went on.

And his auditors amplified, “It’s not his voice, it’s his mind.”

Once, when the singer had left, after having swallowed his drink, the host began to incite Liza, “How about having a bit of fun with Kleshchov, eh? How about stirring him up? What’ll you ask for a job like that?”

“I would if I could shed a few years,” she said, with a laugh.

The host persisted. “What are the young ones good for? I’m sure you’ll hook him. You’ll have him prancing around you. And when you’ve got him down, then how he’ll sing out of misery! Come on, do me a favor, will you; take him on!”

But she refused. The blowsy old creature looked down, toyed with the fringes of the kerchief that was pinned over her breast and reiterated, in a drawling monotone, “That’s for a young one to do. I wouldn’t hesitate a second if I could shed a few years.”

Time after time, the host tried to get Kleshchov drunk; but after he’d done his couple of songs and had his glass after each, he would draw his wool scarf around his throat, and adjust his cap over his tufted head, each operation being performed very precisely, and would make his departure.

In his attempts to get Kleshchov down, the persevering host sought to find a rival. After applauding the harness-maker’s performance, the host would hopefully present a competitor. “Now, let’s hear this other singer. Come on, show your stuff!”

Sometimes a really good voice would turn up; but I can’t recall the time that a rival of Kleshchov’s could match his simple, but profound, renderings. “Ahem,” said the disappointed host, “that’s not bad. You have a voice, certainly; but the soul isn’t in it.”

The auditors jeered, “You can’t beat the harness-maker!” And Kleshchov, looking down on them all, from beneath his tufted brows, said with icy politeness, “Why waste your time?”

You'll find no one to rival me; my endowments come from God."

"We all come from God."

"You may hand out drinks till you're ruined; but you'll not find my rival."

The host reddened with rage. "Well, we'll see, we'll see!"

"This is singing," said Kleshchov pointedly, "not a cock fight."

"Of course. You don't have to harp on that!"

"It's not harping; I'm only trying to get the matter clear. The song that's meant just for entertainment comes from the devil."

"O.K. Cut the talk and let's have another song, instead."

"I can sing anytime, even when I sleep," said Kleshchov, and clearing his throat, he sang.

And, miraculously, the trivialities, the stupid wrangling, the conceit, vanished as if in smoke. Over us flowed refreshing streams of another life, meditative, loving and melancholy. How I envied him, his gifts, his power over others, of which he made remarkable use. Though I yearned to become acquainted with the harness-maker and have long talks with him, I could not get up the nerve to do it.

The look he gave everybody out of his pallid eyes had an annihilating effect, as if those in front of him did not exist. Something about him offended me and short-circuited the attraction I felt toward him. I would have preferred to admire him for his own personality, not merely for his singing. I felt repelled by the way he tucked his cap over his head like an old man, by the way he swaddled his neck so conspicuously with that red woolen scarf, saying, "It was knitted by my little one, my own daughter."

When not singing, his face puffed out and he massaged his cold, corpselike nose with two fingers, answering queries in reluctant monosyllables. When I came up to him to put some question, he gave me a chilling look and said, "Be off, boy."

My preference went to the choir singer, Mitropolsky. He swayed into the tavern with the gait of a heavily burdened man, hooked a chair over to him with the toe of his shoe, and sat down, his elbows on the table, and his heavy, shaggy head

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supported in his hands. After silently downing two or three glasses, he would emit a resounding bellow. With a start everybody would turn toward him, and, chin in hands, he would return their stare with defiant eyes, his mane of unkempt hair forming a wild halo around his pale, bloated face.

"What're you gawking at, what?" he would demand.

"Looking at a werewolf!" would sometimes be the answer.

Evenings would pass without a sound from him, and as he had drunk in silence, so he would shuffle heavily off in silence. Other times he would play the prophet, howling denunciations at people. "I, the incorruptible servitor of God denounce you! Behold, Isaiah! Woe to the city of Ariel.³⁹ Beware, ye sinners, ye evildoers, ye wicked ones, ye abominations in every form, sunk in the slime of your depravity. Woe to the worldly ships, for they carry sinners to lewd destinations. I know ye, ye sots and gluttons, ye scum of the earth; your day is not set; you live because earth shrinks from admitting such cursed ones into her womb."

His voice was so resonant that it made the window panes rattle, something which always titillated his audience. They honored the prophet thus, "What a bark the shaggy dog has!"

Acquaintance with him came easily. All it cost was your hospitality to the extent of a bottle of vodka and a slice of beef liver. To my question, what books would he recommend, he replied with a fierce counter-question, "Why any?" But, observing my confusion, he softened down and asked, "Have you read Ecclesiastes?"

"Yes."

"Then keep on reading it. There's nothing more you need to read. There's all the wisdom of the world in it, though the sheep, of course, can't follow it; which means no one does. Can you sing anything?"

"No."

"Why not? You should sing. There's no more absurd way to pass the time."

From an adjoining table someone observed, "But you sing, too?"

³⁹ Symbolic name for Jerusalem, as possessed by an evil spirit, as used by Isaiah.

"It's all right for me. I'm a tramp. So what?"

"Nothing."

"That's nothing new. We all know there's nothing in that blockhead of yours: And there will never be more than nothing there. Amen!"

This was his way with everybody, but after I had stood him to several liver-and-vodkas, he softened toward me. One day he observed, with a note of actual surprise in his voice, "I look at you and I can't make you out, who or what or why you are! Devil take you, whatever you may be!"

Toward Kleshchov his behavior was mystifying. He accorded him obviously delighted attention; yet he avoided acquaintanceship and his expressed opinions of him were rude and derisive. "That dummy! He has breath control and some understanding of what he's singing, but beyond that—an ass!"

"Why?"

"Like the rest of them."

I would have preferred talks with him in sober moments, but in those moments all he could do was growl and stare out of dim, fogged eyes. I was told that this alcoholic had been a divinity student at Kazan Academy. I doubted it, but once, talking about myself, I mentioned Bishop Khrisanph. With a nod he said, "Khrisanph? Him I know. I was a protégé of his at the Kazan Academy. Khrisanph means 'flower of gold.' Ah, Paul Berynd was correct when he wrote, 'Khrisanph was truly a flower of gold!'"

"Who's Paul Berynd?" I asked, but Mitropolsky cut me short, "None of your business."

At home that night, I jotted into my notebook, "Must read the works of Paul Berynd." For some reason I decided that there I would find answers to questions that were troubling me.

Mitropolsky had an annoying way of interjecting names I did not know and words of his own coinage.

"Life's no anisio," he said.

"What's anisio?"

"Something good for you!" he replied, enjoying my befuddlement.

From his epigrammatic remarks and the knowledge of his Academic studies, I concluded that he was a learned man,

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and I resented his unwillingness to share his wisdom, or his imparting it in such unintelligible forms. Or had I no right to expect so much of him? At any rate, he was one of those who left their mark on my mind. I relished the alcoholic audacity of his diatribes, in which he patterned himself on Isaiah. "Oh, ye unclean and debased worldlings!" he roared, "among you it is the worst who are acclaimed and the best who are reviled. But the Day of Judgment advances. Then, you will repent, but the time for repentance will be gone, will be past!"

Listening to his tirade, Good Idea came to mind, Natalie the laundress, so suddenly and directly plunged into hideous ruin, Queen Margot blurred over in foul scandal. What memories I had heaped up!

A strange incident brought my acquaintance with this man to an end. One spring day I met him in the fields adjoining the garrison encampment. He shambled like a camel, his bloated head wagging from side to side. He looked lonely. "Taking a walk?" he asked hoarsely. "I'll join you. I also came out for a walk. Brother, I'm one sick man!"

After taking a few steps together, without speaking, we came upon a pit which had been dug under a tent. In the pit we saw a man sprawled on the bottom, seemingly resting his shoulders against the side. His coat was pulled up over one ear as if he had tried to take it off and given up.

"Drunk," conjectured Mitropolsky, coming to a halt.

However, on the new grass beside the man lay a pistol, and nearby a cap and a bottle of vodka, barely started, with the neck knocked off and tossed into the high grass. The pulled-up overcoat covered his face as if he had hid under it in shame. For a moment neither of us spoke; then Mitropolsky, standing with his legs apart as if to steady himself, said, "He's shot himself!"

The realization that the man was not drunk, but dead, came upon me so suddenly that I couldn't quite accept it. I recall feeling neither fear nor sympathy as I stared at that big, shaven skull and that pallid ear. Incredible that a man would take his life on such a vivid spring day.

Mitropolsky stroked his stubby cheek and, in a shaking voice,

as if he felt a chill, said, "He's on in years. His wife must have left him or he might be an embezzler."

He dispatched me to fetch the police while he sat down at the edge of the pit to wait, his feet dangling over and his threadbare overcoat swathed around him. Having informed the police, I hurried back, to be met on the way by Mitropolsky who had finished the dead man's vodka, and was waving the empty bottle. "That's what ruined him!" he cried, and dashed the bottle to smithereens on the ground.

The policeman who had followed behind me, after a glance in the pit, bared his head and worriedly crossed himself. Then he asked Mitropolsky, "Who are you?"

"None of your business!"

The policeman paused, then tried to sound reasonable. "How can you account for yourself? There's a man dead and you're drunk!"

Slapping himself on the chest, with a proud air, Mitropolsky said, "I've been drunk these twenty years!"

I feared he would be arrested for drinking the liquor. In the meanwhile a crowd gathered. A stern police inspector, who had arrived in a cab, let himself down in the pit, lifted the dead man's overcoat and peered at his face.

"Who was the first to see him?"

"I," claimed Mitropolsky.

The inspector stared at him and said with portentous irony, "Congratulations, your lordship?"

There were about a dozen people there by now, including spectators and police, clustered around the pit, looking down and panting with excitement. From one of them came the outcry, "I know the man! He's in civil service; lives down our street."

Mitropolsky, hatless now, confronted the inspector, swaying unsteadily, and engaged him in inarticulate argument. The inspector knocked him down with a blow in the chest and the policeman unhurriedly brought some cord out of his pocket and bound the wrists of Mitropolsky who had arranged them, docilely, behind his back, as if quite used to it. The inspector, shouting, "Beat it, now!" dispersed the crowd.

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Now an older cop arrived, a man with red-rimmed, watering eyes, his mouth gaping with fatigue. He took up the end of the cord which made up Mitropolsky's bonds and quietly led him off. I, too, left the place, feeling dejected, with the singer's arraignment, "Woe to the city of Ariel" echoing in my mind's ear. Nor could I keep out of my mind's eye that melancholy scene of the policeman unhurriedly pulling the cord out of his pocket, and the thundering prophet submissively crossing his hairy red hands behind his back, wrist over wrist, as though it were by habit.

Shortly afterward I learned that the prophet had been banished from the town. Kleshchov also vanished. He had made a good marriage and had moved to another quarter and to another harness shop.

I had sung Kleshchov's praises so ardently that my boss said, "I must hear him!" And thus, one night, he sat with me and I saw his brows lift and his eyes go round with awe. On the way over he had ribbed me and had kept up the ribbing in the tavern, deriding its frequenters and complaining of the stuffiness. As the harness-maker began, a contemptuous smile was still on his lips. But he was so taken by the singing that he stopped midway, while pouring a bottle of beer, exclaiming, "What the devil!" With a reverent hand he put the bottle down and settled back, absorbed. "Yes, indeed, brother," he acknowledged, sighing, when Kleshchov had finished. "That man can sing! Devil take him, he's heated up the whole room!"

The harness-maker resumed, his head back, his eyes on the ceiling. "On the path from the thriving village, a maid tripped over the dewy meadows."

"He sure can sing," repeated my boss, with a smile and a contented nod.

And clear as reed notes came Kleshchov's cadences, "And to him, the lovely maid replied, 'An orphan, I, by no one wanted.'"

"How good!" my boss said, his eyes suffusing, "damn good!"

It delighted me to have him enjoying it. The lamentation in that song overcame the tavern din, and gained in strength, in beauty, in pathos, with every note. "Solitary am I in the

village; no invitations come to me; poor am I, alas; my dress is plain. No young hero will come for me. A widower will take me to work for him. Such is my fate, but I shall not submit."

Making no effort to restrain them, tears dripped from the boss' eyes down to his knees, as he sat with his head bowed and his big nose snuffing. After the third song, looking nervous and rumpled, he exclaimed, "Let's start home. I'll stifle in this reek. I can't stand it any longer!" But when we were outside he said, "Let's not go home, Peshkov; let's have supper in a restaurant."

He hailed a cab and, without stopping to haggle down the fare, got in and was silent all the way. In the restaurant, however, where we took a corner table, he started off wrathfully, though in a low voice, abusing the singer, "That goat's bowled me over, driven me into a black melancholia! Tell me—you do a lot of reading and thinking—what the hell sort of sense does it make? You live; forty years go by; you're married, have children, and not a soul to talk to! Sometimes I feel I must unburden my soul to someone, talk out the things on my mind, but I have no one. My wife? We have nothing in common. What is my wife? She has her children and the house to occupy her. To all that's in my soul she's alien. One's intimacy with one's wife lasts only till the first child arrives. Altogether, in fact, she's— Well, I don't know how to tell you, it's not to my tune that she dances. Damn it, flesh without a soul!"

Feverishly he guzzled down the chill and bitter beer. After a silence, he ran his hand through his long hair and said, "All in all, what scum people are, brother! Take my sub-contractors. You've been talking to them. I know there's underhand work going on; they're all thieves! And does anything you say matter an atom to them? No! They spill everything you say to me—all of them, Peter, and Osip, too. They're a gang of crooks. They talk about me—you speak up for me—and what's it all about, brother?"

I was too dumbfounded to say a word.

"There you are," said my boss with a sudden smile. "That Persian trip of yours wasn't such a cockeyed idea, after all.

You'd understand nothing they say there, not knowing their language. In your own tongue you can count on hearing nothing but filth."

"Has Osip been telling you things about me?"

"Mm—yes! But that shouldn't surprise you. He's the gabbiest of the lot; a real gossip; and a sly article, brother! No, Peshkov, you won't get at them with your words. Don't you see that? What the devil is it all about? And what the hell difference does anything make? Nothing. Autumn snow, it lands in the mud; it melts; it makes more mud. Better keep mum."

He had one beer after another without getting drunk, though his talk grew fiercer and more staccato. "You know the proverb, 'Speech is silver but silence is golden.' Brother, brother, life's all misery! That was true what he sang. 'Solitary am I in my village.' Man's a lonesome animal!"

With a furtive glance around him, he confided to me, in a lowered voice, "I'd found myself a friend, someone really compatible, a woman who lived alone, practically a widow; her husband had been sent to prison in Siberia for counterfeiting. I made her acquaintance. She hadn't a cent. In fact, that was how our acquaintance began. 'What a sweet little thing!' I thought. She was young, pretty—really a wonderful little woman. I saw her a couple of times, and I told her, 'Your husband's a no-good. Your yourself are living a disreputable life. So what's all this talk about following him to Siberia?' But that was her decision. 'No matter what he is, I love him,' she told me. 'He's good to me. Probably it was for my sake that he committed the crime. And it's for his sake that I'm sinning with you. I need the money for him. He's a gentleman, used to a good living. If I were unmarried, I'd lead a chaste life. You're a good man, too,' she told me, 'and I'm very fond of you; but please don't bring this up again.' Damn, I gave her all the money I had—eighty rubles or so—and I told her, 'Forgive me, but I can't see you any more. No more!' And I went away—and so—"

He stopped and the next I knew he was drunk. He sat huddled up, muttering, "Six times I went to her apartment. You couldn't begin to understand what I went through. I might

have paid her six visits more; but I couldn't get up the courage, just couldn't. Now she's gone."

He put his hands on the table, drummed with his fingers, and whispered, "I pray God never to come upon her again! God grant me that! Otherwise, the devil would have me. Come on, let's go home!"

As he staggered along, he mumbled, "And that's how it goes, brother!"

His story was no surprise. I had long suspected that something out of the way had occurred. Yet, I was depressed by his conclusions about life, and still more by what he had revealed about Osip.

Chapter Twenty

I SPENT THREE YEARS OF MY YOUTH AS OVERSEER IN THAT DEAD and empty town, watching workmen dismantle the ill-proportioned stone bazaars in the autumn and reconstruct them in the spring. The boss saw to it that I earned every kopeck of the five rubles he paid me. If a foundation had to be relaid, it was my job to excavate the whole site to a depth of over two feet. Day workers were paid a ruble a week for such labor, but I received nothing, being held accountable for my regular work, as well. But while I was digging away, the carpenters unscrewed door knobs and locks and got off with whatever else was detachable.

Workmen and contractors both used every deception to make off with something; and took little trouble to hide it, going about it as if it were just another chore. They were amazed, rather than outraged, at my remonstrances. "Making a twenty-ruble fuss over a mere five. You're comical!"

I pointed out to the boss that for the ruble he saved on my labor he was losing ten in stolen goods, but he blinked and dismissed it with, "Go on! You're imagining things!"

I realized he suspected me of being in collusion with them, but I did not react to this—though it alienated me from him—with any sense of personal injury. In that world theft is universal; the boss himself gloated over picking up a piece of unguarded property. When the Fair was over and he was inspecting booths that were to be reconstructed and came upon forgotten articles—a samovar, kitchen utensils, a mat, a pair of scissors, or even a case of merchandise—he would smile and order me to "list the articles and carry them to the supply room." From there he would take them home, sometimes without bothering to remove them from the list.

I had no such itch for possessions; even books I found

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hindrances. I had kept only the little volume of Beranger and the lyrics of Heine. I would have added Pushkin if the bookseller, an avaricious old man, had not overpriced his copies. Furniture, mirrors, rugs cluttered my boss' home, and far from affording me any pleasure, their graceless bulk and the smell of varnish they exuded, was an irritant to me. The most disagreeable room of all belonged to the boss' wife; it made me think of a trunk crammed with useless articles. And I could not help thinking less of the boss for adding the lifted stuff to all this clutter. Queen Margot's apartment had also been crowded, but had nevertheless been exquisite.

On the whole, life seemed a ridiculous mess; too much of it was obvious stupidity. Here we were constructing bazaars, knowing that the spring floods would waterlog the floors, warp the doors, and rot the beams. The Fair grounds had been inundated all these past ten years, with huge damage to bridges and buildings; but no move was made to divert the flood waters, as if they were expected to find their own spillways. Each spring, too, the ice-pack, as it broke up, slashed and cracked barges and other vessels; and with resigned groans the people built new ones, only to have them destroyed again by the ice. It was ludicrously like a treadmill, where all one's motion serves to pin one down.

When I spoke to Osip, he laughed and expressed amazement. "You young heron! What a perky heron we have here! What've you got to do with it? What's your stake in it?" Then his voice sobered, though a humorous gleam still flickered in his pale blue eyes, which had a clarity unusual for his age. "But that's a very keen perception. Conceding that it's no business of yours, still it may be of some use to you to look into it. Here's a case that bears upon it." And in a flow of talk, lavish with pithy proverbs, odd images and witty turns of all sorts, he went on: "Here, the people deserve sympathy. They have little enough land, but in the spring the Volga floods off the topsoil and deposits it on sandbanks, bringing suffering to others who complain that this silts up the channel. Other streams in the spring flood stages tear gullies through the soil and carry off still more of the topsoil into the river."

'All this was spoken without a trace of fellow-feeling for the

sufferers, almost as if this knowledge of life's privations gave him some satisfaction. Although what he said was in corroboration of my ideas, I could take no pleasure in it.

"When there are fires——."

I can't recall a summer without forest fires veiling the sky with muddy, yellowish smoke, through which the leaden sun, its radiance dimmed, stared down like a sick eye.

"Who gives a hang about the forests?" continued Osip. "They're the property of the gentry, or the crown. The peasants have no stake in them. And if a town burns down that's not so terrible, either; it's the rich, mostly, who live in towns, so why waste pity on them! But it's a different matter when a village burns; and how many burn each summer? At least a hundred, I suppose. Now, that's serious." And he gave a soft laugh. "Some who have property mismanage it; so, as we see, a man labors less for his own profit, on the land, than against fire and water."

"Why are you laughing, then?"

"What's wrong with that? Tears won't put out a fire or make any difference in a flood."

I considered this personable old man the cleverest I had run across, but what did he actually love or hate? That question was always on my mind as he provided me sere little sayings to add to my collection.

"Watch and take note how spendthrift people are of their own or other people's energies. Your boss, how he wastes yours! And what's the price of water in a village? Such things will bring you a richer wisdom than schools can provide. If a peasant's hut burns down it can be rebuilt; but when a good peasant goes blind you can't build him a new eye. Ardalon or Gregory, for example; that'll show you how a man can cut loose! The first one's a fool but Gregory's a man of intelligence. But he smolders like straw. Women swarm over him as worms swarm over a corpse in a forest."

Not out of anger, but out of curiosity, I asked, "Why did you report to my boss what I told you in our talks?"

His reply was unembarrassed, and in fact kindly. "To let him know what dangerous ideas are cooking in your head. He has to know to be able to teach you better; who's there to teach

you otherwise? I didn't tell him to make trouble for you, but for your own good. You're certainly no fool, but the devil's at your brain. If it were just stealing, or skirt-chasing or liquor, I'd have kept mum; but any wild talk I hear out of you will go right back to your boss; so now that's clear."

"Then I won't talk to you any more."

He said nothing, picking off resin that had crusted on his hands. Then, with an affectionate look at me, he said, "Oh, yes you will. Whom will you talk to otherwise? You have nobody else."

Spruce and tidy, Osip sometimes made me think of the stoker, Jake, in his indifference to others; or the icon appraiser, or the carter, Peter; now and then, something in him reminded me of grandpa; in fact, in some ways, he recalled every old man I knew. They were all wonderfully interesting, but I felt living with them would be out of the question, would be a strain and a nuisance. There was a spiritual rot in them; their worldly wisdom covered hearts brown with rust. Was Osip a man of good will? No. Of ill will? Not that, either. All I could be sure of was his shrewdness. And, while I could applaud his intelligence for its dexterity, it did not stir me; and in the long run I felt it as a hostile force.

There was a seethe of dark thoughts in my mind: All men are alien to one another no matter how much they smile at each other and exchange compliments. Furthermore, we are all aliens to Nature, to whom few feel the bond of love. Grandma alone actually enjoyed life and was fond of other creatures—grandma and sweet Queen Margot.

Such thoughts deepened the mist around me, in which I choked and felt overpowered. But what other life could I live? And where cou'd I find it? I had no one to confide to, except Osip, to whom I spilled more and more. He heard out my feverish chatter, with obviously piqued interest, drew me out with his questioning, made revealing points and concluded, matter-of-factly, "The woodpecker taps away and alarms nobody. From the bottom of my heart I urge you to settle down in a monastery till you come of age. Talks with the holy men will clear things up for you and soothe you and you'll feel at peace; and you won't be a financial burden to them. That's

my truest word to you. The world is not for you; that's clear."

But the monastery had no attraction for me, though I felt lost and confused and miserable here in the bewitched maze of the world. I lived as in an autumn forest, with the mushrooms gone, the woods empty, and nothing more to discover there.

I did not drink and I kept away from girls, books substituting for the intoxications they might have afforded me. Yet reading made the empty, useless life I saw around me rather more unbearable. I had barely rounded fifteen, yet there were moments when I felt elderly. It was as though I had inwardly grown heavy and aged with what I had experienced, and read about or thought about. In my self-examination I realized I had allowed my field of impressions to clutter up like a cellar bin, till it was beyond my strength or understanding to clear it out. And the clutter was not packed down, but seemed to churn about, with my mind eddying in it, like a piece of float-sam.

I had a distaste for troubles, sickness, injustices. The sight of blood, brawls and the infliction of cruelty of any kind, even when no more than verbal assaults, aroused a physical repulsion in me which soon passed into cold fury and made me hurl myself into brawls, like an animal, and left me afterwards sore with shame. To see a bully in action precipitated me into blind charges, which I recall to this day with dismay, as expressions of my despair and helplessness.

I was a dual personality. In one I was sensitive to the perversions and violations of the dignity of life, and depressed to timorousness for that reason, and bowed down by the awareness of the daily horror of existence; and then I looked at life and people warily and with a touch of scorn, though expending a frail compassion toward all, myself included. In this personality I contemplated a withdrawn, hermit-like existence of books, a monastery, a forest ranger's hut, a railroad signalman's shed, Persia, a night watchman's post somewhere out of town—in any case, somewhere away from people. The essential was to see fewer people, to be removed from the human animal.

In the other personality I had received my knighthood in

the vigels of profound and elevated reading. I had perceived the overpowering might of the daily evils of life, how it could wear away the mind's strength, how it could muddy and trample the heart with its dirty feet; I had set myself in unremitting opposition to it, and taken a belligerent stance, with gnashing teeth and raised fists. Here love and pity were of the active sort; and like the heroes of chivalrous romance, I was always poised for battle; my sword flashed from its scabbard, on the first occasion.

In that period, I had an implacable foe in the porter of a Maly Pokrovsky Street brothel. I encountered him, one morning, on my way to the Fair grounds, dragging a girl, torpid with drink, out of a cab, before the gateway. His hands were clamped around her rumpled stockings; and holding her thus by the legs, bared to the waist, he was gloating over what he had exposed. After spitting on her bare body, he gave her a tug that yanked her out of the cab; and bedraggled, unseeing, her mouth gaping open, and her limp arms trailing behind as if they were without joints, she jolted out, her spine, the nape of her neck and then her bluish face bumping in turn against the cab seat, then the step, and finally on the pavement, her head banging on the stones.

The cabman drove off and the doorman, one of her feet in each hand, hauled her after him as if she were inanimate. In a blind rage, I lunged at him, but by a mischance, overturned a rainwater barrel, something which spared us both much unpleasantness. On the rebound I bowled him over, sprang up the steps, pulled the bell-rope and brought out some furious people to whom I was unable to g've any articulate explanation; and I went off, stopping to right the upset barrel. I overtook the cabman, who looked down from his seat and said, "Nice, the way you bowled him over."

I vented my rage on him. How could he have permitted the porter to so vilely maltreat the girl! His reply was cool and supercilious, "On my part, they can all go hang. A gentleman engaged me to drive her here. I don't give a damn who beats whom!"

"Supposing he had killed her?"

"Aah, that sort you kill off sooner or later," said the cabman, quite as if it were his habit to murder drunken prostitutes.

From then on, I ran into that porter practically every day. He would be sweeping out his gateway, or straddling the banister as if awaiting me. At my approach he would get up, roll up his sleeves, and favor me with the announcement, "Now, I'm going to chop you up in little pieces." The man was over forty, paunchy, small and bowlegged. It was rather horrifying to observe a cheerful and even amiable expression in the laughing look he gave me. It was no match because I had a big advantage in reach. After absorbing a few punches, he would look puzzled, call it a round, and send me off with, "Never mind, I'll show you yet, smarty!"

Bored by all this, I asked him, "See here, you fool, why do you have to bother me?"

"Then, why do you fight me?"

In turn, I asked him why he had abused the girl.

"What business is it of yours? Do you pity her?"

"Naturally!"

He stroked his lips, then, after a silence, asked, "Would you pity a cat?"

"Yes."

"Then you're a dope, you rascal," he said. "I'll give it to you, yet!"

I could not go another way and so, in order to avoid these encounters, I got up earlier. After a few days, however, there he was waiting for me with a gray cat on his knees. When I was just a few steps away he cracked its head on the stone balustrade so that its warm blood spattered me, and threw its body at my feet, crying, "What are you going to do about that?"

What indeed? We thrashed about the yard like two dogs; and, later, sitting in the grass, nearly demented with inexpressible anguish, I bit my lips to keep from bawling. Every time I recall it, a sickening shudder convulses me, and I wonder that I did not go mad and kill someone.

Why do I speak of these enormities? Just to let you know, gentle readers, that they are by no means a thing of the past.

You have a taste for the macabre, perhaps; you enjoy horror stories artistically told; you get pleasurable thrills from the grotesque and the terrible? But I can match them with real, daily horrors; and it is certainly in place for me to provide you with these unwelcome chills to remind you of the way we live, under what actual conditions. Let the truth be told, ours is a debased and squalid life!

I love mankind, and have no wish to add to anybody's misery; but sentimentality must not be served at all costs; one must not cover up dreary reality with rainbow verbiage. Let us see life for what it is. What is good and human in heart and mind needs to be refreshed by knowledge of the truth.

What disturbed me most at the time was the common masculine attitude toward women. From my reading I had come to look upon women as all that gave life beauty and meaning. Grandma had nourished this in me with her accounts of the Madonna and the wise Saint Vasillissa. And I had been helped by what I knew of the forlorn Natalie, the laundress, and by those countless smiles and loving looks with which women, the source of life, offset this sordid existence.

Turgenev's novels gave loving regard to women; and my memory image of Queen Margot was wreathed with all that I had learned about women's excellences. For that I drew mainly on Heine and Turgenev.

On my return from the Fair grounds in the evening, it was my habit to stop on the hill beside the Kremlin wall and gaze at the sunset over the Volga. Torrents of fire streamed across the skies; the river, on the earth below, had turned purple and blue. There were moments then when the land had the appearance of a colossal convict barge or pig, on a towline behind a slow steamer.

But my mind veered more and more to the world beyond, to cities I had read about, to peoples abroad and the differences in their customs. The life described by foreign writers was more wholesome and pleasing, less burdensome than the viscid, tedious life that clung about me. And this soothed my spirit with the horizons it projected of a possible different life ahead of me. And I anticipated, with some confidence, a meet-

ing with some wise but unsophisticated man who would guide me there.

Sitting one day on a park bench under the Kremlin, my Uncle Jake took a seat beside me. I had not observed him approaching, and I did not immediately recognize him. Though we had both been living in the city, we had seldom met, except by chance, and then for no more than a glimpse and a greeting.

"My," he remarked jokingly, "you've certainly stretched out!" In the conversation that followed, we spoke like people well, but not intimately, acquainted.

From grandma's accounts, I knew that Uncle Jake's recent course had consisted mainly of idling and quarreling. Also, that he had been assistant warden at the jail, but had had an ignominious fall from that eminence. The head warden, having been indisposed, Uncle Jake had taken command. He had gone so far as to entertain the convicts in his own room. In addition, he had allowed some of them to take airings outside the jail gates, the chief charge in the indictment against him, when the episode was investigated. None of the convicts had gotten away, but one had been apprehended in an attempt to choke a deacon. The affair hung over a long time, but never came to trial. The testimony of both wardens and prisoners exonerated my uncle sufficiently to keep him out of the courts. Now he was jobless and living on his son, one of the singers in the currently modish Rukavishnikov church choir.

Of this son he made some curious remarks, "He's turned hoity-toity, just because he's one of the soloists. He flares up if the samovar's not ready just when he wants it, or if I miss a speck of dust when I brush his clothes. Quite the dandy, he is!"

Uncle Jake himself was prematurely aged; he looked run down and seedy. His former mass of curly hair was quite gone, making his rather small ears look conspicuous. Heavy, purple veins seamed the whites of his eyes and his leathery cheeks. He seemed to have good teeth, yet his kidding talk was thickly enunciated as if he suffered some impediment.

I welcomed the opportunity to talk to a man who knew

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something about good living, whose experience was wide and who therefore ought to know a good deal. My recollections of him included sprightly songs and grandpa's characterization of him, "In singing he's a King David, but in business matters he's a plotter like the evil Absalom."

The promenaders who passed up and down included gentlemen in fashionable attire, military officers and officials. The contrast of Uncle Jake's threadbare topcoat, ragged cap and discolored boots obviously put him out. We therefore went to a tavern on the Pochainsky causeway, where we took a window table from which we could look out on the Fair grounds.

"Remember how you sang, 'When the beggar hung out his socks another beggar stole them'?" As soon as I said this, the cynical sense of the verse became clear to me for the first time, and I felt confirmed in my impression of my uncle as a man whose wit had a tincture of animosity in it. As if answering unspoken questions he remarked, as he poured himself some vodka, "The truth is, I'm getting old and I know I've done very little with my life. That song's none of mine; a seminary teacher was the composer. Now, what was his name? I can't remember, though we were bosom friends. He's dead and gone now. He was a bachelor and he died of a stroke in his sleep. Ah, how many I've known of, who've gone asleep—beyond counting! You don't drink? Good; keep away from it. See much of grandpa? He isn't having a happy old age; in fact, I think he's losing his mind."

Reanimated by the vodka, he straightened up and looked like his old self once more, and his conversation became lively. I took the opportunity to ask him about the convicts.

"So you've heard of that?" he said, and followed, after a cautious look about him, in a hushed voice, "The convicts? Who was I to judge them! To me, they were human beings, that's all, and I told them, 'Let's see if we can be happy here; let's see if we can live in harmony.' There's a song which goes, 'Happiness laughs at prison bars; no matter how they deal with us, laughter's still what we live for; only a fool lives for other things.'"

He laughed, stroked his beard, and looked out upon the gathering evening shadows on the causeway. "Naturally, they

were bored, lying there in jail; and after roll call, they visited me. We had vodka and snacks; on some occasions they were provided by me, on others by them. I'm fond of singing and dancing and there were some grand singers and dancers among them. Now it all seems unbelievable. Some were chained, and they don't malign me who say that I unchained them. But Lord, they know how to manage that themselves without a locksmith. Remarkably handy they are, those people. But those who say I let them roam around and hold people up, they're spreading nonsense; no evidence of that was presented."

He fell silent again, looking through the window, watching shopkeepers locking up showcases. There was a clatter of iron bars, a creaking of rusty hinges, a thump of wooden shutters being let down. Then, with a wink, he resumed, but still in a hushed voice, "To be honest, a convict did get out, but not one of the chained ones; just a neighborhood thief from that part of town. His girl lived nearby, on the Pechorka. And the trouble with the deacon was an accident. He mistook the deacon for a businessman. It was a snowy night, with everybody bundled up in winter clothes. He was in a hurry; how was he to tell, rushed as he was, the deacon wasn't a businessman?"

This struck me funny; and he joined in the laughter. "By God! What a hell of a thing—"

But here, my uncle was seized by an unaccountable fit of anger. He pushed away his dish of refreshments, frowned, and his eyes darkened with disgust. Puffing belligerently at his cigarette, he growled, "They swindle each other, then they catch each other; then they put each other away in jail, in Siberia, and in the mines. What's that to me? I spit on the whole business. I'll take care of my own soul!"

And he seemed to me, then, another incarnation of that shaggy stoker, also named Jake, who had also, defiantly, "spit upon" people.

"Now, what are you thinking?" asked my uncle in a low voice.

"Did you feel sorry for the convicts?"

"It's natural to feel sympathy for them; they're children; really it would surprise you. I'd look at one of them sometimes

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and I'd think, 'I have authority over him, when the truth is, I'm not fit to shine his shoes!' What handy fellows they were, those devils!"

Once again, with his recollections seemingly spiking his drink, his manner livened up. He rested his elbow on the window sill, flourished his cigarette in his cigarette-stained fingers, and said, in a now ringing voice, "Among them was a twisted little man, a watchmaker and engraver who was in for counterfeiting. You should have heard him talk! It was like a song, no, like a flame! 'Explain if you can,' he'd say, 'why the treasury can mint money and not I? Explain that!' And no one could explain it. I, the person in authority, couldn't. Then there was a famous Moscow pickpocket, a well-mannered chap, rather dandified, but neat as a whistle; and in his well-bred way, he'd say, 'People dull their senses with work. I'll have no part of it. I've given it a try. You work and work until you're too tired to think straight; and then two kopecks of vodka makes your brain swim; you take a hand at cards and drop seven kopecks; five kopecks goes to a woman for a minute or two of kindness; and back to the bench you go, shivering and famished. Not for me,' he says, 'that game's not for me.'"

Uncle Jake bent over the table, his face red to his small ears, which quivered, along with the rest of him, with excitement: "And let me tell you, brother, they made sense. They knew what's what! To hell with formalities! Take me. What account can I give of myself? The life I can look back on fills me with disgust. Its joys? Fragmentary and underhand. My sorrows I could claim openly, but my joys I had to take by stealth. My father on one side, my wife on the other, both yelling, 'You can't this!' and 'Don't that!' I didn't dare spend a ruble on my own. And that's how my life dribbled away. And now, what I've come to, lackey to my own son! I won't attempt to fool myself. I'm his humble servant, brother, that's all, and he's as sharp with me as any gentleman with his servant. He calls to me, 'Father!' and up I bounce like any man in livery. Is this what I came into this life for? Is it for this that I struggled against poverty—to become my son's servant? But, apart from that, why was I born? What good have I got out of life?"

My attention had wandered. When he stopped, however, I asked, merely as a rhetorical question and not looking for an answer, "I wonder how my life will turn out."

He burst into laughter. "Does anybody know? I've yet to meet the man who does! People just hang on; and the one who can take whatever comes—"

And again his tone became caustic and resentful, "One of the men was in for assault, a gentleman from Orla who happened to be a good dancer. He used to amuse us with a song he called 'Johnny.' Johnny would pass the cemetery; a simple matter you think; but, whoa, Johnny; you'll never get past the grave!" It don't sound so funny to me now, because that truth's too close to home. You can't go back in life; and you can't get past the grave. So, what's the difference, convict or warden!"

He had talked himself to weariness, finished his vodka, and stared into the empty decanter with one eye, quite like a bird. In silence he lit yet another cigarette, the smoke billowing out of his moustaches.

"There's no sense striving, or hoping for anything, for no man gets past the grave and the cemetery." That I had heard from Peter the mason, who was nothing like my Uncle Jake. How many such sayings I knew by now!

I had nothing more to talk about with my uncle. It was rather dismal being with a man you pitied. There kept coming back to my mind his jolly tunes, and the sound of his guitar on which he had converted a soft melancholy into happiness. But neither had I forgotten the jovial Tsigan. No, I recalled him, too; and, looking at Uncle Jake's beat-up face, the thought leaped into my mind, "Does he ever think of how he killed Tsigan, crushed him under the cross?"

But I had no wish to remind him. I looked out on the causeway on which one of the gray fogs of August was settling. There streamed in fragrances of ripening apples and melons. Down the converging streets the night lamps began to glimmer. And at that moment the Rybinsk steamer whistled, to be followed by the siren of the Perm steamer. It was all so familiar.

"Well, we better get going," my uncle said. And, at the tav-

ern door, as we shook hands, he said jestingly, "Don't give way to your moods. You're a little on the gloomy side, aren't you? Spit on it. You have youth. Just bear in mind that Fate is no bar to happiness. Well, so long, I'm off to Uspen!" And away went my jovial uncle, leaving me more confused than before.

I walked through the town and out to the fields. It was midnight now, and there was a heavy scud of clouds whose shadows blotted out mine. Walking on, I came to the banks of the Volga where I lay down in the dry grass to gaze at the river and the fields and the still earth. Slowly across the Volga drifted cloud shadows which, when they reached the opposite bank, seemed to glisten as if they had bathed in the river. Everything around me seemed sleepy, in a sort of torpor; every movement seemed to be forced and unwilling, lacking the animation, the energy of movement that came out of desire.

And I was overcome with the wish to liberate the whole world and myself, by some magical act, so that I and everyone would whirl with joy in a mass carnival dance, so that people would give their love to each other here on earth, so that they would live for each other, and their lives be courageous, exalted and beautiful.

But I thought also, "I must do something for myself or it will be all up with me."

Often on scowling autumn days in the past, when there was no sight of the sun, and no sense even of his warm presence, when one almost forgot there was sunlight—more than once on such days, I walked into the forest, off the highroad, past even the dimmest trails, until I was too fatigued even to look for them. Then, gritting my teeth, I would go straight ahead, clambering over rotting logs, over the almost jelly-like mounds on swampy ground; and, sooner or later, I would strike the road. And it was in such a way I reached my decision.

That autumn I went to Kazan, secretly purposing somehow to become a student.

Murder
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